

## Still Strange by orphan\_account

**Series:** [The Weirdos of Hawkins \[1\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Angst, Eventual Romance, Friendship, Gen, Hurt/Comfort, Sibling Bonding, Sick Character

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Carol (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lonnie Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Scott Clarke, Steve Harrington, Tommy H. (Stranger Things), Will Byers

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-08-31

**Updated:** 2017-09-05

**Packaged:** 2022-04-02 01:40:59

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 15

**Words:** 31,066

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Things are back to normal in Hawkins, but not really.

Will is sick and everyone knows it.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

Hi, this story is on my fanfiction account but now I finally got an ao3, so here it is. I'll be posting a few chapters at a time until I catch up to where I'm holding. This is a Jonathan centric fic bec. I love him.

## Christmas Day, 1983

Jonathan got out of his car and slowly walked up the steps to Hopper's cabin. He couldn't see any lights on inside and the house had an abandoned feel to it. Jonathan knocked a little tentatively. He could hear a muffled groan but couldn't make out what was said. A moment later the door opened and Hopper appeared, looking rather disheveled, in an off-white undershirt and sweatpants.

"Oh, I thought you were...never mind." Hopper said a little taken aback. "So, uh, what's up?"

"Oh, um, my Mom, she uh...she sent this." Jonathan said handing over a gift-wrapped package with a card attached.

Hopper took the package and looked at Jonathan expectantly. "Is that it?"

"Uh...yeah, yeah." Jonathan said looking down, his hands in his pockets.

"Alright then, thank your Mom for me, Merry Christmas." Hopper began retreating back into his house.

Jonathan looked up. "Hopper!"

Hopper turned back.

"I uh...I wanted to thank you." Jonathan blurted out. "For everything....for everything you've done for my family....for my Mom....and for Will. I...just...i....thank you. He finished off looking

away, his hands fidgeting.

Hopper glanced away. "Yeah," he grunted noncommittally.

"Yeah, well...that's it." Jonathan turned to leave when Hopper grabbed him by the shoulder.

"You're a damn good kid."

Jonathan refused to meet his glance, he was not used to accepting praise. Hopper now grabbed him by both shoulders, forcing Jonathan to look at him.

"Listen, this isn't over by a long shot." Hopper said. "Take care of your Mom, and your brother, they need you. And if you see anything weird, you tell me, got it?"

Jonathan nodded. Hopper slapped him on the back and then headed inside, letting the door slam behind him as Jonathan got back into his car and headed home, pondering Hopper's words.

---

"Jonathan"

"Jonathan"

"Jonathan!"

Jonathan opened his eyes to find Will's face barely a foot away from his.

"What's going on?" he muttered, rubbing his eyes. "What time is it?"

"It's about three."

"So what's up, couldn't sleep?" Jonathan asked sitting up.

"Yeah, I...I, um...can I sleep in your room?" Will asked.

Jonathan looked at his little brother. He looked awful. His hair was sticking out in every direction, his face was a sickly pale shade of

green and his eyes were bloodshot. A wave of fear washed over Jonathan and he thought of Hopper's words from last week. Something was obviously wrong with Will.

"Will, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm...I'm okay, I just can't sleep. I keep having these....I don't know."

"Will, you can tell me if something's up." Jonathan said looking at Will thoughtfully. "You know that, right?"

"I know." Will said, flashing his trademark smile.

Jonathan relaxed at the sight of it and shifted over on his bed to make room for Will who clambered on and snuggled up near his big brother. He hadn't done this in a while but right then he needed the security that Jonathan gave him.

"Will, can you do something for me?"

"Sure."

"I need you to promise to tell me or Mom if something's up with you."

There was a long pause and finally Will answered. "Okay."

"That's a promise?"

"Yeah, yeah I promise."

"Okay, now try to get some sleep."

Jonathan lay still for a while and soon he could hear Will's steady breathing as he drifted off. Jonathan looked over at his brother; the person he'd do anything for, who he wanted to protect more than anything, who he'd give up his own life for, and he sighed. Hopper was right, Will was not himself.

He lay back down, taking care not to bother Will, and eventually fell into a troubled sleep.

---

Joyce hurried into the kitchen at 8:00.

"Honey, I'm already late, so can you get Will up and get him off to school?" She called out to Jonathan as she packed herself a quick lunch.

"Yeah, you know I will."

"Thanks Jonathan." Joyce said and with an absentminded pat to Jonathan's arm, she was out the door.

Jonathan walked into his room where Will was still fast asleep.

"Will, come on man, you gotta get up."

Nothing.

"Will, come on, it's late."

The blankets stirred for a moment and then Will popped up. He looked around for a moment, disoriented. "What...oh right."

Jonathan took a good hard look at the kid. There were bags under his bloodshot eyes, and he still looked kind of pale.

*He could use a day off.* "How about you stay home today?"

Will looked confused. "What? Why?"

"You don't look so good. I was thinking we could just hang out today. Do anything you want."

"Yeah, cool." Will smiled tiredly.

Jonathan patted him on the head, messing up his already unruly hair a bit more. "Get some more sleep," he said and left the room.

At around noon Jonathan got Will up and made him a feast; bacon, toast, pancakes, eggs, hot chocolate...you name it. They spent a couple hours on the couch watching movies, listening to music, and just goofing around. Jonathan kept a close eye on Will the whole

time. He still felt somewhat responsible for Will's ordeal, particularly whenever he saw him in any discomfort.

*He seems okay.* Maybe it was just nightmares haunting Will. Maybe it was nothing a good day off couldn't fix. But Jonathan doubted it, it'd been a long time since Will had slept with him and that wasn't a good sign. Jonathan's mind wandered back to the days when this was a common occurrence. It was usually when Lonnie was intoxicated. He'd come home in a drunken rage and start yelling obscenities at anyone within range. That person was usually Joyce. Jonathan would come between the two and plead with them to stop. He hated the way his mom's face would go blank as Lonnie yelled and he knew that eventually the words would turn into blows, so he'd jump in, but that only served to make him the target of Lonnie's rage.

Later on, he'd be in bed, listening to the muffled shrieks coming from the kitchen, when there would be a familiar light tap on the door and Will would sneak in, locking the door behind him. Jonathan never forgot the look in Will's eyes on those nights. It was a look of raw pain, made all the worse in the eyes of a 5-6 year old kid. Jonathan would hold him tight, until the shaking and tears stopped. They'd listen to some music, take some pictures, sneak a few snacks from the stash he kept in his room, and just talk, until Will would eventually fall asleep and Jonathan was left to listen to the shouting and to deal with any new bruises he'd been dealt by his Dad.

Jonathan came back to the present. *Don't go there*, he told himself. *Just don't go there...*

## 2. Chapter 2

"Mike!"

"Mike!"

Mike Wheeler snapped back to the present.

"Jeez Mike, what's wrong with you?" Lucas asked annoyed. "That's like the tenth time I've called your name."

"Yeah, you look like you're under a Feeblemind spell." Dustin added.

Mike sighed. He found it hard to concentrate on anything, let alone a ten-hour marathon of Dungeons and Dragons. He was also finding it increasingly hard to sleep. Images of the Demogorgon advancing on him and his friends kept popping into his head. But it was Eleven that really occupied his thoughts. He thought about her all the time. Whether they were hanging out in his basement, in school, or riding their bikes around town, El's face as she said goodbye to him was always there. He'd cried a lot the night that it all happened but since then he'd held it all in. There was no one he could talk to. His mom didn't even know who Eleven was. Lucas and Dustin would start teasing him. Will was one person he could probably talk to but he'd be too embarrassed and Mike didn't want to bother him now anyway; he was still recovering from his time in the Upside Down. Then an idea so preposterous came into his head that he actually let out a little laugh.

*Nancy! Ha, right.* He'd rather be dead than talk to Nancy about Eleven.

"Uhh, Mike, you're acting really weird." Dustin said as he popped open a can of honey-mustard Pringles.

"I just thought of something funny." Mike said as he produced the Thessalhydra with a flourish, but as he rejoined the game he couldn't help thinking about the Nancy idea.

Dustin rolled the dice. "Shit! Snake eyes! Now we're gonna have to

fireball this band of Thessalhydras."

"No we don't!" Lucas yelled. "We can just cast Zone of Truth."

"We don't have enough power for that" Will reminded him.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! This is insane. We're gonna be taken down by Thessalhydras!" Dustin moaned, his hands over his face.

"Yeah, because you decided to fireball that army of Trolls earlier!"

"What?! That was your idea!"

"Uh, no. It wasn't" Lucas said indignantly.

Mike found himself drifting off again and he noticed Will didn't look too involved either. Mike could tell he wasn't right, but he'd been too occupied with El to bring it up. *Besides*, he reasoned, *his Mom is probably dealing with whatever it is.*

"Ok, Ok!" Dustin was saying. "We're gonna use the M&Ms to decide."

"What! Where does that get us?" Lucas rejoined.

"It worked last week against the Mind Flayer."

"Fine, fine, ok?" Lucas roared. "But if we lose now it's your fault."

"OK. If it's a red, we fireball him, if it's a yellow, we cast protection, and if it's blue then we do Cone of Cold."

"What about the green ones?" Lucas asked, rolling his eyes.

"We'll pick again." Dustin answered immediately. He opened a pack of M&Ms and, without looking, he pulled one out.

"Dammit." said Lucas.

It was a red one. Dustin popped it into his mouth. "Alright," he said rubbing his hands together. "Let's fireball this son of a bitch." He rolled the dice....it was a 14.

"YESSSSS!" They all roared.



"Dustin brandishes his axe and with a battle cry, he advances on the band of thessalhydras. His weapon a blur, his face dripping with sweat, he cuts them down one by one, until finally, the leader falls to the ground, in a pool of blood!" Mike called out. "Dustin lays down his axe and hurries over to the fallen....."

Mike finished up the campaign just as Jonathan came downstairs. "Hey guys, all done?"

"Yeah, just finished." They called out.

"Alright, let's go."

Since Will's disappearance, the boys always got a ride home after dark. They moaned and complained about it, but secretly they were glad, especially Will. It was usually Jonathan who drove them, but occasionally Dustin's or Lucas's mom would.

The boys piled their bikes into the trunk (it didn't close) and got into the car. Mike looked on as they drove away and let out a sigh. He hated the few hours between his friends leaving and him going to bed. Being alone without anything to do made him miss El even more.

Mike went back inside and headed upstairs, pausing outside Nancy's room to peek in. She was sitting on her bed in pajamas just staring down, music blaring in the background.

"Nancy, you okay?"

Nancy started. Seeing Mike, she put on her You-Are-So-Annoying face that she reserved for him. "Damn it, Mike! Have you ever heard of privacy?!"

"What?! I was just trying to be nice! You looked all depressed." Mike huffed.

Nancy looked away, her face changing back to the despondent expression she'd had on. She knew she was taking out all of her frustration on him. "I know. I'm sorry Mike." She said, looking at him apologetically.

"Yeah, s'okay." They'd been getting along a lot better lately.

Mike turned to leave.

"No, wait. Come in here Mike, we need to talk."

Mike came in, shutting the door behind him. He sat down on Nancy's bed and looked at her expectantly.

*What could Nancy want from me?*

"I...Mike," she started. "We...do you remember that night at the school when every-"

"Yeah."

"We promised to tell each other everything, Mike. I know it's weird and everything, and you probably feel awkward, but I'm worried about you. You haven't been yourself."

Mike looked away, shaking his foot nervously. It was now or never. Nancy was right, it was very awkward. The Wheelers didn't do feelings and serious talks.

"Okay," he said. "But you need to hold up your end of the bargain too."

Nancy smiled. "Deal, but I don't want this reaching Dustin."

Mike smirked. But the smile faded fast and he sat there, hesitant to begin. *Where do I even start? I've never done this before.*

"Just talk, Mike," said Nancy sensing his discomfort. "Just talk about what's bothering you."

"Um...ok. Do you promise not to tell anyone?"

"Mike! What do you take me for?"

"Ok, it's like this; like remember when I asked you if you like Jonathan and you asked me about Eleven?" Nancy nodded. "So, I don't know if you were lying, probably you were, but I know I was."

Mike paused and glanced at Nancy, she wasn't smirking; no triumphant grin, just understanding. He continued. "It's like, when she showed up she was so scared and so lost, I just wanted to protect her. And then when I saw that....that I made her happy...." He trailed off.

Nancy waited. She didn't want to force him.

"The first time she smiled felt so good. She was trying out the recliner and I leaned it back. You could tell that no one had ever treated her nicely before. As we got to know each other, she started trusting me, she trusted me to take care of her and I wanted to do that so badly." Mike stopped talking as tears began welling up in his eyes.

"I was supposed to protect her and I let her down. She's gone. She's probably dead now. And..." Mike was now crying in earnest but he didn't stop, it felt good to talk. "I can't stop thinking about her now. What could have been. She deserved to live. I should've gone instead of her. She deserved to have people take care of her, to have a normal bed, to eat normal food, and... to have people love her."

Mike stopped. He couldn't talk anyway. He was too choked up. Nancy put her arm around him and was surprised that he didn't shrug it off.

"It's not your fault Mike. I know you feel guilty and that's normal but there's nothing you could have done."

They sat there for a couple minutes, each lost in their thoughts, when Mike looked up. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Your turn."

"Oh, I....I don't know. I mean, like the same way you feel responsible for Eleven, I feel pretty guilty about Barb. I...she was my best friend. I mean..." Nancy trailed off and pointed to her cork-board where dozens of pictures hung, many of them depicting Barb and her. "I feel terrible about it. Like it's my fault. And there's no body, no funeral, there's no closure, everyone thinks she ran away. I mean, even her Mom...."

Nancy burst into tears. "Seeing her Mom is awful. I keep wondering if

she suffered, if it hurt. I miss her so bad."

She cried for a bit and then continued. "And then there's Steve. I don't even know if I like him. Just being at school, hanging out, it all feels so fake and so lame. People died around here and all they can do is discuss the latest dating rumors. No one gets it, no one gets us." Nancy looked up at Mike. "You know what I mean?"

Mike nodded. "Uh huh. It's like Dustin and Lucas. They can't really handle anything serious. Will could, but he's always been that way. Probably because he grew up in a pretty screwed up situation."

Nancy went still at the mention of Will's name and Mike could tell she was thinking about Jonathan.

"You know, Jonathan is really cool." Mike put in. "He's not like most people who have no time for their sibli...." Mike stopped talking as he realized what he was saying. "I didn't mean you, sorry!" he laughed. "But seriously, Jonathan's a good guy. I remember years ago when we went to the county fair and I fell off that spinning ride and broke my leg. I was panicking and crying, but he calmed me down and got me to the hospital. And he always does cool stuff with us in the summer and he takes us to the movies all the time...." Mike finished off, he knew he was rambling but he meant it.

Nancy gave a weak smile. "Yeah, I know he's cool."

"Um, ok, are we done?" Mike asked, suddenly very uncomfortable.

"Yeah, if you are."

Mike got up to leave but Nancy stopped him.

"Hey," she said holding her arms out towards him. "Get over here."

Mike rolled his eyes but obliged. It was awkward to be hugged by his sister but he had to admit, it felt good. Mike pulled away. "Good night."

"G'night, Mike."

Mike was halfway out the door when he turned back. "Thanks," he

muttered and then quickly slipped out.

### 3. Chapter 3

Jonathan woke up with a start. His hands were clammy, sweat was dripping down his face and there was a deep pit in his stomach. He'd been dreaming about the Monster. Again. He and Will had been hanging out at the lake behind their house when it came. It started attacking Will, and Jonathan, unable to move, had had to look on as the Monster devoured him.

*Something's not right.* Jonathan could feel it. He quickly got out of bed, pulled on a t-shirt, and headed to the kitchen to wash his face. Suddenly he heard it. Retching, followed by gasping breaths and muffled sobs. Will.

He ran down the hallway and burst into brother's room only to stop short. *What the hell?*

The usually orderly room now looked like a war zone; not because anything was out of place but because of the brown-green slime that was everywhere. Will was hunched over on his bed, his fingers clenched on his night table and his back heaving.

"Will!" Jonathan dashed over to him. "Will look at me!"

Will looked up. His face was deathly pale, his eyes were glazed, his lips were cracked and bloodied, the same sludge that covered the room could be seen in his mouth, tear streaks ran down his cheeks, and the veins that were now visible on his face were throbbing. "I'm sorry," he croaked and his eyes watered.

"No, Will, there's nothing to be sorry for." Jonathan said, enfolding him in a hug. *When had he become so thin?* "I'm sorry Will, I should've seen it. You're sick, really sick. We're gonna get you some help."

"I didn't want to worry you and Mom." Will said into Jonathan's shoulder. "I...I thought I could deal with it on my own."

"Will, come on! Look at you! You need a hospital. Fast."

"No! Not the hospital!" Will started shaking again. Ever since he'd

gotten pneumonia when he was seven and had to be hospitalized, he hated even the mention of the place.

"Don't worry, buddy. You'll be alright"

Will just shook his head, but he knew that it was unavoidable. He'd been getting worse and worse by the day. He'd been hitching a ride to school with Jonathan because he could barely ride his bike anymore. He was tired, all the time, He'd stopped eating. And of course there was the vomiting.

"Are you gonna stay with me?" he asked weakly.

"Hey, you know I will."

Jonathan led Will to the bathroom and helped him clean up, and then he sat him down on the couch.

"I'm going wake up Mom, and we'll get you to the hospital, alright?" Will nodded.

Jonathan paused outside his mom's room and leaned against the wall. He put his hand over his eyes, pinching them. *This is happening. This is really happening.* His mind raced, coming up with all the possible things that might be wrong with Will.

*Please let him be okay. Please. Please. Please.* Jonathan didn't know if he was praying or just talking to himself. All he knew was that he would never forgive himself if anything happened to Will.

He opened the door to Joyce's room, walked in, turning on the light as he did, and gently shook her awake.

"What...What's going on?" Joyce muttered.

"It's...it's Will. He...uh, he's not ok." Jonathan felt terrible having to give his Mom the news. She'd been through so much. She deserved a little break. He had contemplated taking Will to the hospital himself but had quickly dismissed the idea when he imagined Joyce's face when she found out.

Joyce was immediately alert. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's pretty sick, we need to get him to the hospital." Seeing his mom's face at his words felt like a stab to the heart and Jonathan struggled to hold back tears. *I can't get like that. I need to hold it together.*

"Ok, ok. I'll be out in a minute and then we'll go." Joyce said, putting on a brave face.

Jonathan left the room and sat down in the living room near Will.

"Jonathan?"

"Yeah?"

"What are they gonna do to me?"

"I really don't know." said Jonathan shakily. He wanted to reassure Will, tell him that everything was going to be ok, but he didn't have the heart to do that. Everything was not okay.

Will looked at him and Jonathan could see he was on the brink of tears. *He knows that it's pretty bad.* "I...whatever happens Jonathan, I...I love you."

Jonathan pressed his lips together and his face dropped; Will was the sweetest person he knew. "Yeah," he said holding Will to him. "I love you too, Will."

Will put his head down on Jonathan's shoulder and closed his eyes. They stayed that way for a few minutes until Joyce came out.

"Will, baby! What's wrong?" she said, hurrying over.

Will smiled weakly. "I'm not feeling so good. Jonathan thinks I need the hospital."

"Oh, honey." Joyce hugged her youngest to her, noting how sickly he looked. She could feel him shivering too, as though he was freezing.

Joyce released him, though she still kept a firm grip on his arm. "We gotta get going. Can you walk, sweetie?"



"Yeah, of course I can." And to prove his point, Will got up and headed to the door.

The three of them got into the car and they drove to the Hawkins Hospital. It was a chilly night, with the occasional flurry of snow, and the car was silent besides for Will's labored breaths, each of them lost in their own thoughts; Joyce was thinking about their last stint in the hospital, barely two months ago. Jonathan was thinking about losing Will, his mind jumping to the worst conclusion, as usual. And Will thought about the other two, sad that he continued to be the one who caused so much pain and trouble.

They arrived at the hospital and entered the emergency room which was nearly empty. Hawkins didn't see much by way of illness and injury. They registered at the front desk and were shown to a room almost immediately. Will changed into a hospital gown and had blood drawn from him. When the nurse left, the room became extremely tense. Joyce sat with her hands clenched and Jonathan paced the length of the room, which was a meager twelve feet.

Finally the doctor arrived. He was a huge guy with massive shoulders, not something you typically see in a doctor. Also unusual was his age; he looked barely twenty-five.

"Hey guys, how you all doing tonight?" He asked, looking around. There was no response; they just stared at him blankly. "Alright, alright. My name is Brian Cole, you can call me Dr. Cole. Now," he consulted his clipboard. "The early test results show a few abnormalities in..." Again he consulted his notes. "In Will's blood. We're going to have to do some comprehensive testing to figure out what it means. Right now, we don't know what it is. It could be anemia, something more serious than that like cholemia, neutropenia or even any number of blood cancers, it could also be something as simple as iron deficiency. Right now, we need to take Will for further testing.

"It's not iron deficiency." Was all Joyce could manage.

"Well, ma'am, you never know."

A couple of technicians came in and began wheeling Will out of the

room; Joyce and Jonathan hurrying after them. They came to a much larger room where a couple of nurses began preparing Will for the various tests he was to undergo.

"We're going to have to ask you to leave." A large, red-headed nurse told Joyce.

Joyce looked at her like she was crazy. "Are you insane? That's my boy, I'm not going anywhere."

"Fine, but he's definitely got to," the nurse answered, gesturing at Jonathan who was standing right near the gurney.

"Ok." Joyce didn't want Jonathan to be in the room anyway. Her sixteen year old son had seen far too much in his young life and she didn't want this added to the list. She went over to him.

"Jonathan, you need to wait outside." Jonathan shook his head. "Baby, look at me. Please just help me out on this one; I don't want to make a scene. They insist you leave, so please....we'll be done in no time.

Jonathan looked at his mom and gave in. The last thing he wanted to do now was argue with her. He took Will's hand and squeezed it. "You'll be fine, alright. I'll be right outside." Will nodded in a daze; the anesthetics were already kicking in.

Jonathan gave Joyce a quick hug and left the room. He sat down in the emergency room, put his head in his hands, and waited.

## 4. Chapter 4

Jonathan's fists were clenched and his stomach tight. A while back, the receptionist had turned on the radio and he was forced to sit through songs like *Hot Girls in Love*, *Come Dancing*, *Hungry Like the Wolf* and *Maneater*. They were in such stark contrast to his mood that Jonathan couldn't take it. He considered asking the girl to turn them off but he didn't want to bother her. When *Maniac* started playing, though, and the receptionist turned up the volume, Jonathan had had enough. *Who likes this garbage*, he thought as he got up and left the hospital.

The snow was coming down pretty heavily and he suddenly realized that he was still wearing his sweatpants and the thin white t-shirt he'd thrown on. He didn't care though. The cold felt good right then, numbing him and his emotions. He stood outside the hospital, leaning against the wall, his clenched hands in his pockets. A couple of nurses were hanging out across the lot, smoking and laughing loudly, and Jonathan watched them, lost in thought.

*He said cancer. It could be cancer.* Jonathan knew he was being irrational, that even if Will did have cancer then it would have nothing to do with the Upside Down, but he couldn't help it. A gust of wind blew through the parking lot and Jonathan, shivering, headed back inside. Thankfully the music had stopped as there were a few patients waiting to be admitted.

Just as he sat down, Joyce walked into the room, her face drawn.

"They're finished with the testing," she said. "Come on." She led Jonathan through a maze of brightly lit corridors, finally reaching Will's room. He followed his mother in and, seeing that Will was asleep, sat down in one of the uncomfortable chairs near Will's bed.

They waited....and waited.....and waited...and waited. The sky lightened outside and the sun rose. Finally, at about half past six, Dr. Cole walked in. His swagger was less pronounced and the arrogant, confident expression he had worn earlier was gone. He closed the door behind him and turned to face them.

"Is it okay for him...?" He addressed Joyce, gesturing at Jonathan.

Joyce put a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "Of course it is, he's the man of the house."

Dr. Cole took a deep breath. "Okay. I'm going to be completely honest, alright?"

They both nodded and Jonathan put a protective arm around Joyce.

"It's not good. The test results show a massive growth in Will's stomach, not unlike a tumor. The problem is we've never seen anything like it. It appears to be feeding off of him, sort of like a parasite. Uh...the truth is we aren't equipped to handle such cases and he's going to have to be transferred to somewhere like South Bend or Evansville, or even Indianapolis."

"What do you mean you've never seen something like it? What...what is this thing?" Joyce asked desperately.

"Honestly we don't know. It most closely resembles a cancer, but it appears to be more alive, growing, breathing almost. What we're really scared of is that it's metastasized and that's a real possibility since we found some pretty alarming substances in Will's blood after further testing. Typically with cancer, if it's metastasizing then you have a real serious problem, but this seems to be even worse."

They all looked over at Will. He seemed so peaceful and it was hard to imagine a tumor eating up his insides.

"What are the treatment options?" Joyce asked desperately.

"Well, since we've never seen this before, we'll have to try a host of things to see how it responds. If we treat it like cancer then we're definitely talking surgery, even if it's just for staging, obviously radiation therapy or chemo...." At this, Joyce blanched and Jonathan gripped her tighter. "...may become necessary. Again, this is all speculative." Dr. Cole finished off.

Joyce set her jaw. "What are his odds?"

Dr. Cole looked away, and sighed. "Do you really want me to answer

that?"

Joyce nodded vigorously. "And don't lie to me, I need to know."

"Ok," he said still avoiding her gaze. "I've been doing this for just four years but, honestly this looks really bad. It's...uh..." He took a deep breath and looked at Joyce. "It's about one in ten and that's....that's optimistic."

Before he could suppress it, a sob escaped Jonathan's lips and he dashed out of the room. He needed to get far away. He sprinted down the harsh, unfriendly hallways, running, running, running, away from that room, that stifling room and the sickness that hung like a heavy fog over it. He paused for a second, a stitch growing in his side and noticed the restrooms to his right. He dashed in, thankful that it was empty, and proceeded to throw up in the sink. As he heaved, the tears came, heavy and bitter, falling from his eyes and landing with tiny splashed in the basin.

*Why? Why? What did Will ever do? Why does he deserve this? Why couldn't it be me instead? How is Mom gonna manage this? And finally, What happens if Will dies?*

---

Mike and Lucas met up with Dustin at the bike rack in front of Hawkins Middle School.

"Where's Will?" Mike asked Dustin who usually biked with him.

"I don't know. He's been catching a ride with Jonathan a lot lately." Dustin said as he got off his bike.

"Yeah, he's probably already here." Lucas added.

Suddenly a voice called out. "Freak show's a man down today. Or should I say a queer down" It was Troy. The three of them rolled their eyes and turned around to face the bully.

Not in the mood to deal with him, Mike tilted his head and asked in a bored tone: "What do you want Troy?"

"What I want is some money. Your lunch money, all of yours!" he yelled. "Doesn't really matter that the queer's not here today, does it, he doesn't have any money to give anyway." he continued, trying to bait them.

"Hey Troy, you think stealing money is better than not having money?" Dustin said as he rummaged in his pockets and brought out a few crumpled dollar bills. "You're pretty screwed up. Not that we didn't know that already but, you know, just add it to the list."

Troy's face twisted up in anger. "Think you're so smart Toothless, do you? Well what do you think of this?" And he punched Dustin on the jaw before running off.

Dustin doubled over, moaning. "Ow, ow, ow, my face..."

Mike and Lucas ran over to him. "Are you okay?" They asked together.

Dustin straightened up. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. That son of a bitch, one day I'm gonna kick his ass."

"I think what you did was cool." Mike said.

"Yeah, and we got to keep our money." Lucas said, smiling.

"Uh huh, let's go find Will." said Dustin, still massaging his jaw.

But when they got to homeroom, he wasn't there.

"Now what?" said Mike.

"Now what, what?" Lucas asked, eyeing him weirdly.

"Will?!"

"He's probably just skipping for some reason; maybe he has another one of his stomach aches." Lucas said into Mike's face. "Why are you so worried?"

"Because, in case you haven't noticed, he's looked really bad lately!" Mike's temper was rising. *Did these two care about anything?*

"Uh, yeah, we noticed." Dustin piped up. "We're not half as oblivious as you think we are."

"Then why don't you ever say anything?"

"I didn't hear you saying anything!" Lucas yelled at him. "You act like you're the only one who-"

"Guys, guys, come on, okay?" Dustin reasoned. "If he doesn't show up, we'll go over to his house after school."

They all agreed and the three of them sat down in their seats. Math and English passed by slowly as usual. After science, Mr. Clarke called them aside.

"Hey boys, it's a shame Will isn't here today."

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"Well," Mr. Clarke said, hiding a grin. "The new Heathkit Hamshack came!" Mr. Clarke had convinced the school to purchase another one after the first one was fried by Eleven.

"Cool!" They all exclaimed, their mood lightening instantly. They raced after him as he headed to his office.

---

Jonathan calmed himself down and looked in the grainy mirror. His eyes were still red so he splashed some water on and waited a few more minutes before leaving the restroom and heading back to Will's room.

He opened the door cautiously; Joyce was sitting at the end of the bed, staring at Will. Jonathan was relieved to see that she looked fairly composed. He walked in.

"Uh, hey Mom. I'm sorry about before, I just..."

"No no no, Jonathan, it's okay. Don't apologize for that." Joyce said, walking over to him. She grabbed his arm. "We're not going to give

up. I'm never gonna give up on him.

"Yeah, so, uh, what's the deal?"

"Right now, we need to figure out which hospital to transfer him to." Joyce said. "I really have no idea what to do. I...I feel like this thing in Will is somehow connected to the...the..."

"The Upside Down. Yeah it is," said Jonathan and he told Joyce about the sludge in Will's room. Suddenly, Hopper's words came back to Jonathan. "Mom, I think you should call Hopper. He...he said something to me a few weeks ago, I think he might be able to help."

"Yeah, yeah, I, that's a good idea. I just don't know, you know I'm sure he hates hospitals.... I'll give him a call." She finished off.

"I'll go home and get some stuff together, alright?" Jonathan said, needing to escape again.

---

Mike, Lucas and Dustin parked their bikes and walked over to the Byers' door. They each took turns pounding on it before Dustin spoke up. "Yeah, I don't think anyone's home guys."

"Well, what could that mean?" Mike asked, frustrated.

"It means he went out with his mom or brother, okay? His Mom's car is gone." Lucas pointed out.

"I don't know," Dustin said as he began his nervous pacing. "I mean, think of it: The last time he went missing, he also didn't show up for school. Troy also started up with us that day..."

"Come on, Troy messes with us every day, that doesn't mean anything." Lucas argued.

But Dustin wasn't finished. "What about the Heathkit Hamshack, how do you explain that? We got the first one the day he disappeared, and now this. I don't like it. Something's weird."



"Ok, I say we leave a note on his door, telling him to call us." Mike said. "If we don't hear from him or his family by tomorrow then we can decide what to do."

The others agreed with this course of action and so Dustin produced some paper, Lucas produced a pen and some tape, and Mike wrote the letter.

They hung it up on the door with what must have been a few feet of tape and then they rode off.

## 5. Chapter 5

Jonathan pulled up in front of the house, got out of the car and walked up to the door, fumbling for his keys. He noticed the sign immediately and sighed. He'd have to call one of Will's friends to let them know. They deserved to know. He let himself in and began to rummage around the house, grabbing anything he thought his mom would need. Finally, when he had amassed a rather sizable pile of stuff, he dumped it all into an overnight bag.

Jonathan then turned to a less pleasant task. He dialed the Wheeler's number, hoping it would be Mike who answered. He wasn't in the mood of dealing with anyone else, especially not-

"Hello," said a voice on the other end. It wasn't Mike. It was the last person that Jonathan wanted to talk to right then.

"Uh, hey Nancy," Jonathan said, barely able to get her name out. *Why did it have to be her?* "It's Jonathan."

"Oh, hi Jonathan." They could both feel the tension building, even through the phone. The two had sort of fallen apart since the whole Upside Down incident. It wasn't surprising, seeing as Jonathan preferred to remain as inconspicuous as possible, and Nancy would have had to actively seek him out to maintain a relationship, but they were both very conscious of the fact and it made them uncomfortable.

"Yeah, hi. Is, is Mike there?"

"Mike? Yeah he should be." Nancy answered. " MIKE!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "He's coming," she said back into the phone. "So...how are things?"

"Fine," Jonathan said shortly, not in the mood for conversation. They were quiet while they waited.

Finally Mike came on. "Hello."

"Hi, Mike, it's Jonathan."

"Oh. Um, is this about Will?"

"Yeah, uh, listen, we, uh, we took Will into the hospital last night, he was doing really badly and it's not looking good. I, uh, I found the note and I just thought you guys should know."

"What? I mean, is he ok?" Mike asked taken aback.

"We don't know." Jonathan answered, willing the conversation to end.

"OK. Um, is there like anything we could do to help, or..."

"I don't know. I'll let you guys know what's going on, ok?"

Mike got the hint. "Ok, Um, good luck. I...Let us know when we can visit. I hope that he's okay."

"Yeah, goodbye." Jonathan hung up and grabbed the bag he'd packed. On his way out he spotted some cigarettes. Jonathan knew his mom shouldn't be smoking, that she'd been trying to quit, but he also knew that she needed them when she was stressed. He grabbed a couple of packs and left the house.

---

Mike hung up the phone.

"What's wrong Mike?" asked Nancy, who was still standing right there.

"They took Will to the hospital. He's sick. I knew it! I knew there was something wrong with him! And now.."

"What?" Nancy persisted.

"I don't know. Jonathan was really worried. It sounds like he's really bad." Mike wanted to punch himself. *Why hadn't he done something, said something?*

Nancy didn't say anything. She was thinking about Jonathan and how

far apart they'd grown. *I answered the phone and he didn't even tell me?* It didn't make her angry, just sad; sad at what had happened between her and Jonathan. She cared about him. She really did. She cared about him a little too much. *I did this*, she thought. *I forced him away so things wouldn't get complicated between me and Steve.* There was still time to redeem herself, though. She vowed to talk to Jonathan as soon as she could, and try to explain herself.

Mike took the steps down to the basement two at a time. Lucas and Dustin took one look at his face and they both knew.

"Will?" They asked simultaneously.

"Yeah, well no, well yeah." Mike said, tripping over his words in his haste to get them out. "It was Jonathan about Will. He's in the hospital."

"Shit!" They said in unison.

"What are we supposed to do?" Mike said.

"What do you mean?" said Dustin, putting on his jacket. "Obviously we're going to the hospital."

"Uh, do you really think we're supposed to be there?" Lucas said, but he was also putting on his jacket.

"Who cares?" said Mike, racing out the back door. "It's Will, we need to be there."

They got on their bikes and headed off as the sun began to set.

---

Jonathan walked down the now familiar hallways, leading to Will's room. The door was half open and he could hear his mom sobbing inside. He walked in but stopped short; Hopper was already there and Joyce was crying into his shoulder. Jonathan backed out, giving them some privacy, and sat down on the floor. He could still hear what they were saying though.

"One in ten Hopper, he said one in ten!"

"Joyce. Joyce, what do these doctors really know? They said Sarah was gonna make it. They have no idea."

"One in ten Hop! How do I even..." The next part was muffled.

"I know. I know. Believe me, I know." After that, all Jonathan could make out was muffled sobs. He held his breath, waiting for it to stop, and when it did, he got up and walked casually into the room.

"Hey," he said to them. "I brought you some stuff, Mom." He dumped the bag on the floor and handed the cigarettes to Joyce.

"Thanks honey."

"So, uh, what's happening?"

Hopper spoke up. "They're moving him to Evansville soon. Evansville has some good doctors and a good pediatric department." Jonathan looked away; he knew Hopper was speaking from experience.

"Yeah, we decided on Evansville," Joyce echoed. "It's about an hour's drive from here so you'll be able to come out pretty often..."

"What? What do you mean, 'come out'?" Jonathan asked. "I'm staying with him. I told him I would."

"Oh, Jonathan," Joyce said looking down. "This is a long term thing. I mean, Will's gonna be in there for months, and that's only if he..." she trailed off and they understood what she meant. It wasn't guaranteed that he would last that long. "You need to stay in school Jonathan. I need to know that...that at least you're OK."

Jonathan shook his head. "No mom, I'm staying with him. He's...he's all I have."

"Jonathan please. Don't make this hard on me. You'll be able to visit every day, it's just an hour away."

Jonathan stayed quiet. He knew he was being stupid, that even if he wanted to, he couldn't actually stay with Will for months. But he

couldn't imagine going about life normally while his brother was dying in the hospital. Just the thought of going to school made his stomach sick.

"It's my job to be with him, not yours." Joyce continued. "And I will manage, Jonathan, ok?"

Jonathan relented and he gave his mom a quick nod.

"About this 'slime' that you saw?" Hopper asked changing the subject. "Can you describe it?"

Jonathan told him about it.

"I think it's been going on for a while and he just didn't tell anyone." Jonathan said. "Like a month ago, he came in one night, asked to sleep in my room. I made him promise then, to tell me or my mom if anything was wrong but obviously..."

"So this has been going on for months already." Hopper paused. "When we found him in the Upside Down he had this thing in his mouth, sounds similar to what you described. I had to pull it out; there was at least a foot of it. My guess is that I didn't get all of it. Some of it is probably stuck in him and now it's growing..."

"Ok, listen, Jonathan, Joyce," he said looking at them. "You need to keep this quiet. We don't want Hawkins Lab swooping in and snatching Will. As far as you know, this thing in his stomach came out of thin air. Got it?"

They nodded and he continued. "I'll try to help, but I can't guarantee anything. I don't think withholding this information from the doctors will hurt Will's chances in any way since we know just as little about this as they do. I don't even think Hawkins Lab knows anything. They created this monster and now they're trying to minimize the damage and keep it quiet. Anyone who talks, anyone who knows anything, is a liability, and they plan on silencing them."

Just then, Dr. Cole and two nurses walked into the room and Hopper stopped talking.

"Ok, we're ready to move him." Dr. Cole announced. "We're going to

keep him sedated, if that's ok?"

Joyce nodded and walked over to the window. Dr. Cole followed her.

"Listen, Ms. Byers, I want to wish you good luck. If there's anything I can do, anything you need that you think I can help with, don't hesitate to call."

Joyce nodded her thanks and Dr. Cole left the room. A couple of EMT's came in and transferred Will to a stretcher. The procession, consisting of three EMTs, Will, two nurses, Joyce, Hopper, and Jonathan, left the room.

---

Mike, Lucas and Dustin pulled up outside the hospital. They got off their bikes, leaned them against the wall and barged in. As they made their way over to the desk, it was decided that Mike would talk.

"Um, hi. Can you tell us what room Will Byers is in?"

"And what is your relationship with the patient?" the girl said, rifling through some papers.

"He's not 'the patient', he's Will, and we're his friends." Mike said growing annoyed.

"He's in serious condition, no visitors are allowed, besides, it's well past visiting hours, oh, and he's being transferred." she said reading off a paper. She looked away and started clicking furiously on her typewriter.

Dustin decided to have a go. "Our friend was almost eaten by a monster and now he's in the hospital and he might die, so we really need to see him." No response. He decided to try a different tactic. "Wow! Did I mention how pretty you are?!"

The receptionist just rolled her eyes and the boys turned around, defeated. Outside the hospital, they held a conference:

"Okay, what now? We need to get in there and see him." Lucas said.

"I don't know, she said he wasn't allowed any visitors." Mike said.

"Yeah, but we need to get in. Did you hear what she said? He's being transferred, guys. Who knows where he's being taken? This could be our only shot at talking to him." Dustin reasoned. "We need disguises."

"No problem, I always keep a spare wig and a false beard on me." Lucas said.

"That's obviously not what I meant," Dustin said. "We need a better story. Mike, do you-"

He turned to Mike but Mike wasn't listening. He was looking across the lot to where the ambulances were parked. "Is that Jonathan?"

"Yeah, and there's his mom." Lucas said. They took off, not pausing to think, with Lucas in the lead, followed by Mike and a panting Dustin. They stopped right by the ambulance, where Will was being loaded in.

"What the hell are you kids doing here?" It was Hopper and he didn't look happy.

"We heard Will was in the hospital. We wanted to see him." said Mike.

"How did you know that? Does the whole town know already?"

Jonathan spoke up. "I told them, I think they deserve to know." His eyes didn't leave Will and his face was set.

"Well, keep this to yourselves." Hopper said and then went over to talk to the driver.

Their eyes turned to Will and they all stared at him, shocked at how bad he looked. His face was a pale green and spidery purple veins could be seen snaking down his hollow cheeks. He had an oxygen mask over his mouth and they could hear his thin, croaky breathing. Mike felt the tears come and he didn't make any effort to stop them.

They watched as Will disappeared into the ambulance, as the doors



were shut, as the ambulance, it's lights flashing, pulled away, and as Jonathan pulled out after it. They watched until the lights disappeared from view and then they turned to each other. Mike didn't care if they saw his tears, but he was surprised to see that Dustin was crying too, and even Lucas's eyes were wet.

## 6. Chapter 6

The boys sneaked back into Mike's house through the back door. They sat down, Mike at the table, Dustin on the couch, and Lucas on the steps, and looked at each other, subdued. No one quite knew what to say. Finally Mike spoke up, his voice hoarse.

"We need to help, somehow."

The other two nodded their agreement but did not speak. They were at a loss. It was like the night that Will's fake body had been pulled from the water. The silence lasted nearly 15 minutes, with each boy lost in their own thoughts.

Finally Mike spoke again. "So I think we'll talk about this tomorrow." He wanted to be alone.

They grunted and got up to leave. The boys stood awkwardly outside, looking at each other, knowing they should say something.

"Hey, he's still alive guys, so there's a chance." Dustin said. The other two nodded and then Lucas and Dustin rode off.

Mike headed up to his bedroom and slammed the door. He collapsed on his bed, his face in his hands, his mind racing. *First Eleven, now Will. Who's next? Dustin? Lucas? Maybe Nancy?*

There was a tap on the door. He got up angrily and unlocked it, finding Nancy there. "What?" he asked rudely.

"Are you okay?"

"No. We sneaked out to the hospital, don't tell Mom, and we saw Will. He looks like he's dying." Mike said in one breath, he was tired of pretending and hiding things.

Nancy inhaled sharply. "Oh my God, Mike. I'm...I'm sorry."

"Yeah, it sucks." Mike said looking down on the floor. "It sucks even more if you're Will. He deserves a damn break."

Nancy nodded, gave him a quick hug and wished him good night. "You can talk to me if you want to..." she muttered on her way out.

Mike closed the door and got into bed. He lay there for many hours, unable to sleep before drifting off at around three.

Across the hall, Nancy wasn't faring much better. She was thinking about Jonathan again, her mind racing from one thought to the next. *How is he going to deal with this...he shouldn't be going through this alone...he needs someone even if he doesn't think he does...I wish I could be there for him, but we're so distant these days...would he even want me around at a time like this...he's such a closed book, it's impossible to crack him.*

Her mind wandered over to Steve. Nancy had forgiven him, or at least she thought she had. But the truth is that she had never really forgotten the pain on Jonathan's face as Steve said those awful things. She never forgot what Steve was capable of. *Sure he left Tommy and Carol, but his new crop of friends are not much better. Allyson is a diva, Vince is a certified jerk, and Dylan's just a comedian. And I'm forced to hang out with them just because I'm with Steve.* Nancy was growing more and more convinced that he had just bought Jonathan the camera to get on her good side; he hadn't even had the guts to hand it to Jonathan himself. He also hadn't made any additional effort to speak to Jonathan since and still laughed whenever any of the others cracked a joke about him.

*I don't even feel anything when I'm with him, anymore. I just feel like an object, a tool, doing what's expected of me.* It was then that Nancy understood. She was over him. She had fallen for Steve and now she was over him. She'd been too love-struck to see him for what he really was; a self-centered moron. *God, I've been an idiot.* She thought of Jonathan. The feeling of his hand on hers. His beautiful, shy smile. The way he looked after his mom and brother. It was in such stark contrast to Steve's aggressiveness, his desire, that she found tears streaming down her face. It wasn't so much about wanting to be with Jonathan than just not wanting him to be alone. She knew he'd be beating himself up over this and the thought made her chest burn.

Nancy buried her face in her pillow and cried herself to sleep.

---

Jonathan sat by Will, gripping his hand, his leg shaking nervously. Joyce and Hopper were in another room talking to Dr. Bradley, the head oncologist at the hospital. Will had just come out of surgery, where they had been staging him. Jonathan remembered the look on Dr. Bradley's face when he'd delivered the news; the Thing, whatever it was, was metastasizing. It had already spread to Will's liver and localized lymph nodes. The one good bit of news was that it hadn't spread to his lungs. The doctor had given him a few months.

Will's eyes suddenly fluttered open. He looked around the room wildly, wondering where he was. Then he saw Jonathan. Will became aware of the oxygen mask over his face, and he brought his free hand up, ripping it off.

"J...Jon...Jonathan," he gasped.

Jonathan leaned over, gripping his hand tighter. "Hey buddy. How you feeling?" He tried to smile but it came out more like a grimace.

Will's eyes watered. "Every...everything hurts. What's...what's happening...to me?" he managed to get out.

Jonathan couldn't speak. *What do I tell him?* He wanted to hold Will, to tell him he'd be okay, to make everything right but he couldn't. Jonathan felt so powerless, that he turned away; he couldn't stand to see Will's trusting eyes.

"What...is it?" Will whispered.

Jonathan looked at him, tears now falling freely. The brothers locked eyes and Will understood.

"You'll...be okay, Jonathan...without me...you'll..." but he was cut off. Jonathan leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

"No, I'll never be okay without you." He said gripping Will's shoulders, the only part of him that wasn't connected to a wire. "It's not over, Will. It's never going to be over. We're not giving up on you. We're going to try everything there is to help you. We'll..."

Just then, Joyce, Hopper and Dr. Bradley walked in.

"Oh, Will! You're up baby." Joyce hurried over to her boy. Jonathan let go of Will and walked over to Hopper and the doctor.

"What's happening?" he asked shakily.

Dr. Bradley spoke up. "We're operating on him as soon as he's able to handle it. His body is very weak from the staging so we need to get some food in him and he can't eat normally so we're going to set up a drip. Once he's ready, the plan is to remove the growth from his stomach as best we can. From there we can analyze the substance and try to figure out what may work on it."

Jonathan nodded his understanding. "Um, can you get some medication in him? He's in a lot of pain."

"Yeah, I'll get someone on it."

A nurse came in and started working on Will, setting up an IV drip, as Dr. Bradley left the room.

"Should I go?" Hopper asked to the room at large.

"No, no, stay." Joyce said looking at Jonathan. "If that's ok..."

"Yeah, it's fine." Jonathan said quickly. He sat down in a chair and watched as his Mom and Hopper spoke to Will. Before he knew it, he had dozed off.

---

Nancy walked into Hawkins High School, very apprehensive. After last night, she decided that she would talk to Steve and tell him how she felt. It wasn't about Jonathan, she was just tired of acting like everything was peachy; pretending she loved being Steve's girl, because she didn't. She was scared, though. Steve had a temper and she was worried about how he'd react. Nancy missed Barb now more than ever. She really didn't have any other friends at school; she never thought she'd need any. Nancy spotted Steve hanging out near her locker with Vince and Dylan, and took a deep breath as she

walked over.

"Hey Nance," Steve called out in greeting.

"Hi, um, can we talk privately?" she said quickly.

Vince and Dylan oohed, and Steve shot them a goofy grin, before swaggering off with Nancy. They walked into an empty classroom and Nancy, her heart pounding, turned to face him. By the look on Steve's face, she could tell he thought they were in there for a make-out session.

*This is not gonna be pretty.* "OK, I don't really know how to tell you this but...I...I just don't think that...that we're meant for each other." There, she'd said it.

Steve looked at her, uncomprehendingly. "What? What do you mean Nance? What are you talking about?"

Nancy looked up at him, determined to set him straight. "You know what I said, Steve. I...I think we're better off ending our relationship now."

"Jeez Nancy, that came out of nowhere." Steve was looking away and Nancy could see that he was fuming. She couldn't believe that he didn't see this coming. They'd barely exchanged a word in the last week. Sure, they'd hung out, but for Steve not to realize that something was wrong just reinforced Nancy's desire to break up.

"Is this because of Jonathan?" Steve asked, his face red.

"No," Nancy answered defiantly. "I haven't spoken to him in like a month."

"The hell, you haven't." Steve muttered. "I can't believe you. You're choosing that creep over me?!" His voice was getting louder. "I guess I made a mistake about you after all! You know you can just go..."

"He's not a creep!" Nancy interrupted him. "He's a much better person than you are, actually!"

Steve sneered triumphantly. "I thought this had nothing to do with

him?"

"It doesn't!" Nancy countered. "I'm just sick of hearing you and everybody else trashing him just because he's shy, or, or he doesn't have money, or whatever the hell it is that you think makes him inferior!" She was positively screaming now. "You need to grow up!"

"Oh, I need to grow up?! You're the one acting like a kid here, Nancy!" Steve's chest was heaving. "You know what; I don't know why I'm even bothering with you anymore. You're just a..."

"A what, Steve? I'm just a what?" Nancy whispered; their faces were inches away from each other.

Steve stared back at her, his eyes blazing. "F\*\*\* you, Nancy." He said, and then he walked out of the room, the door slamming after him.

Nancy stared after him, and a smile spread across her face. *That felt good. He deserved that.* She felt free, liberated, like a giant weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

---

Mike, Lucas and Dustin arrived at school together. The fright of the night before had passed and they all felt a little more optimistic.

"We need to get all his school stuff for him, or else he'll fall behind." Mike said.

Each of them picked a couple of subjects to take care of, knowing that it may never come to use. They stuck together and were quieter than usual. Mr. Clarke noticed and called them over after class.

"Are you boys okay?"

They looked at each other uncomfortably. Finally Dustin spoke: "It's, it's Will. He's in the hospital. He's very sick."

Mr. Clarke was taken aback. Will was one of his favorite students, very hard-working and intelligent. "Have you seen him? Is he...?"

"We saw him last night. He was being transferred and...he didn't look good."

Mr. Clarke understood. He made a mental note to call Ms. Byers. "Alright boys, if you have any questions or need to talk, I'm here to help."

The boys nodded and left the building, walking slowly and dejectedly. They rode their bikes around town aimlessly. When Will had disappeared, they'd had something to do; they'd spent their time looking for him. Now they knew what was wrong, and they were incapable of helping. In many ways it was much worse. Still the boys kept on biking, taking comfort in having each other. They went out to Will's house, they passed the hospital, they biked by the school, the theater, the mall, the drugstore, the pizza place, the bar, the bowling alley, and the skating rink. They went by Benny's place which had been reopened by a couple of his friends and they biked out to the abandoned lot where they'd hid from the Bad Men. Finally, when their legs were cramping up, they each headed home, for a long, lonely night.



## 7. Chapter 7

Jonathan was shaken awake by his mom.

"Mom. What time is it? Where am I?" Jonathan looked around. *Oh, I'm in the hospital. I must have fallen asleep. Will was going in for surgery. Will!*

"Was the surgery successful, did they get it?"

"Yeah, they did. They got the main thing out of his stomach." Joyce answered. "Will's sleeping now. He's...he's doing ok."

Jonathan rubbed his eyes. "I fell asleep?" he asked unnecessarily.

"Yeah, I didn't want to wake you. You'd been up for like thirty hours straight."

"Oh, God. What time is it now?"

"About ten. I think you should be heading home honey."

"What? No! I can't leave you here alone."

"It's ok, Jonathan. You need to get home and get to sleep in a normal bed."

"Yeah? And what about you, Mom?"

"I'll be fine. I can't sleep anyway. You get home, get some sleep, go to school, and you can be back here by about four thirty"

Jonathan was too tired to continue arguing. He was getting better at giving in, letting go. "Can I just see Will before I go?" he asked.

"Sure, honey." Joyce led him to Will's room. Jonathan walked up to him. He pulled the blanket down a few inches, revealing a large scar running from Will's chest, down the length of his abdomen. Jonathan traced his finger lightly over the scar. It was hot, he hoped it didn't get infected.

Jonathan turned around. "Alright, I'm going. Just call me if anything happens or just if you need to talk, ok?"

Joyce nodded and wrapped her arms around her oldest. He was so strong, no longer the kid she still viewed him as. "I'm so proud of you, Jonathan." she whispered into his ear.

"Yeah, take care of yourself," Jonathan said as he extricated himself from his mom's embrace.

He left the room and headed down to the lobby. Hopper met him at his car. "Hey, gonna hitch a ride with you, if that's ok, I came here in the ambulance."

Jonathan nodded. "Do you wanna drive, or...?"

"Nah, you can."

They drove for about half an hour in silence before Hopper struck up a conversation. "So, how are you managing?"

Jonathan, his hands on the wheel, looked straight ahead. "Ok, I guess. I don't think it's really sunk in."

Hopper nodded. "It's gonna hurt. I've been here and it's gonna hurt like hell."

Jonathan grimaced. "Yeah, it already does." He didn't really know why he was confiding in Hopper, there was just something about him that Jonathan trusted.

Hopper turned to look at him. "Your mom is doing okay right now, but she's gonna break before this is over. It's bound to happen."

Jonathan didn't say anything. Instead he gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

Hopper continued. "I'll try to help as best I can; I'll come out whenever I have the chance."

This time Jonathan looked over at him and nodded his appreciation. They drove the rest of the way in semi-comfortable silence, until they

pulled up outside Hopper's cabin.

Hopper got out and turned back. "Take care."

"Yeah, thank you."

Jonathan pulled away and headed for home. He turned on the Clash hoping to lift his mood. It almost always worked but now it did nothing for him. He shut it off and sighed. It was past twelve by now and Jonathan decided to cut through town to get home instead of going around like he usually did.

Before he knew it, he was slowing down outside Reboot, the local watering hole. The last time he'd had a drink was a couple years ago at a distant cousins wedding. It had been a one ounce shot of chocolate liquor. Jonathan came to a complete stop and killed the engine. It was tempting. So, so, so tempting. He leaned back, hand pinching his forehead, his breathing heavy. *Dammit!* He thought. *Just a small shot, something to calm me down. Can it really hurt?* But he knew it wouldn't be one shot. Alcoholism was in his blood. Once he started, he would be unable to stop.

The battle in his mind raged on. *Stop it! Do you really want to end up like Lonnie? This is how it starts and it ends with you hurting everyone.* Jonathan's worst fear was ending up like Lonnie. He thought about it often, knowing that he had that potential in him. It was an ever-present worry, whenever he said or did anything slightly mean-spirited. The other side of his brain kicked in. *Just tonight. Just a little bit. Imagine not feeling the worry, the fear. Imagine not feeling anything, just for a little bit.*

Jonathan smacked the wheel and actually cried out in frustration. He thought of Hopper's words. He thought of Will in the hospital, dying slowly. He thought of his Mom. Her taut face. Her frightened eyes. How she'd said she was proud of him. He thought of his dad. The spiteful look on his face. His slutty girlfriends. His fist rearing back...

Jonathan's mind was made up. He started the car back up and pulled away fast. Moments later the temptation had passed and he felt disgusted with himself for even considering it. *I'm no better than him,* he berated himself. The reasonable part of his mind jumped in. *You're*

*tired, you're scared, you're hurting. It's normal.*

Jonathan just shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He pulled up to the house, walked up to the door, and headed in, tentatively, locking up behind him. The house was so lonely, so quiet, eerie almost. Jonathan turned on all the lights. *That was better.* He made his way to his room, trying hard to avoid looking at Will's. Just as he finished changing out of his sweaty, two-day-old clothes, he collapsed on his bed.

Before he knew it, he was shaking, gasping for air, his vision blurred. *Sleep. I need to get to sleep. Maybe this nightmare will just end. Maybe I'll wake up and.....*Jonathan drifted off.

---

He awoke a few hours later, disoriented. It all came flooding back to him; Will, the hospital, last night. He got out of bed and took a long cold shower, letting the water clear his fuzzy brain. Jonathan walked into the kitchen and made himself breakfast. He was dreading school; it was useless. He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate for a second, and he had a chemistry test that he hadn't studied for. Jonathan decided he'd go anyway. Just to keep up the façade.

Before leaving, he called the hospital and tried to get his mom on. They couldn't reach her and Jonathan hoped that Will hadn't deteriorated even further.

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled into the school's parking lot. A gang of guys were hanging out nearby and Jonathan tried to avoid them like always. But they were headed over. He could see Steve was the leader of the pack. Jonathan turned to face them; running would be useless, better to just take them on now.

For one ridiculous moment, he thought that they were actually coming over to offer their condolences, but that delusion was quickly shattered.

"Hey Byers!" Steve called out. "You and Nancy doing anything special tonight?"

Jonathan looked at him in confusion. "What are you talking about?" he muttered.

"You know what I'm talking about, you son of a bitch." Steve hissed into his face. He grabbed Jonathan by the collar and cuffed him, causing Jonathan to gasp for breath. Jonathan's eyes showed nothing, they were blank, dead. At this point he had shut down.

Steve continued squeezing and it became harder for Jonathan to breathe. He could hear Steve cursing him out, calling him all sorts of trash, but that was at the back of his head, as though he was watching it from a distance. What was real enough was his lack of oxygen.

Jonathan reached up, grasped Steve's hand, and forced it away. He was stronger than the older boy and he could pummel him if he wanted to. He'd done it before. But Steve had backup and Jonathan had no doubt that he would use it. Besides, he was already mentally drained and wasn't interested in engaging. *I gotta get outta here.*

"I haven't spoken to her in weeks." he said quietly. "You've got this all wrong. I don't force myself on girls like you do."

"From the mouth of the perv himself!" Steve said, his face burning. "You know Byers, you've got some gall. For a guy who-"

The bell rang and Steve paused. "This isn't over." He sneered.

But Jonathan could swear that he looked relieved to go. He briefly considered heading home and to the hospital, but then he took a deep breath and followed his harassers into school.

---

Nancy sat down in her seat. Yesterday had been really lonely. She'd sat alone by lunch for the first time in many years. She felt like everyone was giving her nasty looks. But she didn't regret any of it. *If this is how things are going to be from now on, then so be it.* At least she could live with herself.

Nancy looked up from where she was finishing up a report. She

wasn't imaging it, everyone was looking at her.

"What's up?" She asked Michelle who sat to her right.

"Oh! You didn't see that whole scene in the parking lot?" Michelle asked incredulously.

"What scene?! What are you talking about?"

"You and Steve broke up, huh?" Michelle smirked. "Well anyway, he was like choking the weirdo, what's his name, Byers, or something. Yelling shit about you and him. Like half the school was there."

*Damn it! This was getting worse and worse.* She needed to talk to Jonathan fast, and explain.

She found him during lunch, reading in his car. Nancy tapped on the window and he rolled it down.

"Can we talk?" she asked him.

He got out of the car and looked at her. "Yeah?"

"Can we go somewhere private? I don't need everyone seeing..."

He understood. "OK. Get in the car."

They drove for a couple minutes and Jonathan pulled into a side road, stopped the car and turned to her.

"Ok, Jonathan. First of all, I...I heard about Will. I'm just...I'm so so sorry." Nancy looked at him, trying to gauge his reaction. His face was a mask. "I can't really imagine what it's like, after everything that happened..."

She decided it was time to go for it. "But I really wanted to apologize. For how I've treated you over the last couple of months. I...we were just starting to get along and I...I was worried about how our friendship would impact the relationship between Steve and me. I'm sorry. I know I was an idiot and I want to make it right. I want to make it up to you. I really regret the way..."

Jonathan was looking out the left window. "It's okay, I'm used to it."

*Ouch. That hurt.* The hardest part was that it was absolutely true and Nancy couldn't get mad at him. "I'm...I'm really, really sorry. I really am. I need you to forgive me." Nancy was crying now, she couldn't help it. She needed to make this right.

Jonathan quickly turned around to face her. "Hey, hey," He said putting a hand on her shoulder. "I didn't mean that the way you think I did."

Nancy looked at him, her bright blue eyes hopeful.

Jonathan continued. "I...It's ok. Really. Just please don't cry. I hate seeing people cry, especially...."

He stopped talking, embarrassed. Nancy continued holding his gaze. "Is it really ok, because I was really awful, shutting you out...."

Jonathan waved his hand. "That's nothing. Ok, it *was* something, it hurt. But you're here apologizing, aren't you? And that makes all the difference. Besides, it's my partially my fault, so I'm sorry too."

She smiled at him and he returned her gesture with that self-conscious smile that Nancy loved. Just like that, it felt like the last few months had never happened, like they'd picked up right where they'd left off. But her smile didn't last long. "Umm...about Will, is there anything I can do to help? I really want to. Just thinking about him...Is there anything you need? And please don't tell me that you got everything covered, because how could you?"

Jonathan thought for a moment. "Actually there is something. I need to get my Mom's car to her at the hospital."

Nancy nodded. "Sure!" She said, eager to do something for him.

"Yeah, I'll let you know when we could do that."

"Ok. Can you also tell me when the boys could visit? Mike...", She broke off. "Mike's really upset. He...he just lost Eleven and now he's scared that Will..." She stopped and looked at his expression.

Jonathan sighed. "Yeah, we all are."

He started the car and drove back to the school. Nancy got out of the car. "Hey, thank you for...."

Jonathan gave a sad smile and waved her off. "It goes both ways." He said. She walked back into school feeling infinitely better.

Jonathan sat in his car for a long time after that, thinking about their conversation. He didn't dare to hope that they could be something. He was terrified of relationships, terrified of closeness.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey, sorry to any Steve fans. I know he's not this bad, but I just wanted to get him out of the way, for the sake of the story.



## 8. Chapter 8

Jonathan pulled up into the hospital's parking garage. He and Joyce had waited a couple of days to hear the verdict on the substance in Will's stomach. When he got to Will's room, Dr. Bradley was in there, talking to Joyce, and Will was sleeping.

"...Talked to my colleague at Sloan Kettering, he said he's never seen anything like it." The doctor was saying. "However, he did run some tests and it seems that it responded well to chemo. The radiation was not as effective, though. So what I think we're looking at is some heavy chemotherapy, and we'll see how this thing works inside Will's body. This is definitely going to be inpatient, there's no question about that. We'll probably have to operate on any of the larger stuff too. The biggest problem we face is that Will is so weak already. Chemo takes it out of you. He's going to become a shell of himself and this thing is really, really aggressive so it'll be like fighting a losing battle, it'll probably take months. Again, this is all hypothetical, only if it works."

"When would he start?" Joyce asked, downcast.

"We need to start immediately. This thing is taking over his body fast. If we don't move quickly, it will continue to spread and we'll lose him." Dr. Bradley answered matter of factly.

"Is this gonna work? Or are we wasting our time?"

"Well, this is the equivalent to stage four cancer, where it's already metastasized. If this was in fact cancer, I would recommend palliative care. However, it's not. This is something completely different. It has a lot of the properties of cancer but it's not. Therefore, I say we give it a shot. More likely than not, it won't work, but I think we need to try."

"Ok...Um...so how does this work?" Joyce asked.

"Well, we need to run some tests on Will, to see if and when he can handle the chemo and then we start. If he could take it, I'd like to start tomorrow." Dr. Bradley answered.

"When can he have visitors?" asked Joyce.

"Well, that depends on a couple of things. First, he's going to be really tired, so he'll be asleep most of the time. When he's actually being treated there's a recovery period where we can't have anyone in here too. But really, it's up to you."

"Ok, thank you. Just...just give us a moment to figure this out and decide."

"Of course, ma'am." Dr. Bradley left the room.

---

A day later, Jonathan got home from school at a little past three. He began gathering stuff together that his mom had asked for and he headed back to the car, preparing for the drive to the hospital. Suddenly, someone began pounding on the door. Jonathan sighed. It was Mike and the gang. They'd figured out his schedule and taken to ambushing him every day, interrogating him about Will.

He opened the door. "Hey guys."

"Hi," They chorused.

"So what's happening?" Mike asked.

"Ok, he's going to start chemo tomorrow." Jonathan answered. He'd given up trying to keep things from these guys. They were too persistent. *Besides*, he thought, *why shouldn't they know?*

"Shit!" Lucas swore. "That stuffs gonna kill him. My aunt had cancer."

"It's the Upside Down shit that's killing him." Dustin countered. "When can we visit?"

"I think this weekend, if you guys can come out then."

"Yes!" Mike said. "Finally! Umm..." he turned to Jonathan. "What's he like? I mean...is he..."

"He's still Will, don't worry. He's very weak, though." Jonathan said, seriously. "But he'll be happy to see you guys."

"Alright, thanks Jonathan." Dustin said. "Come on, let's go prepare a campaign for him." And they rode off.

---

Will did begin chemotherapy the next day. Jonathan and Joyce sat with him afterwards. He was extremely nauseous and he kept vomiting as his body tried to handle the toxicity of the drugs that had been administered.

Joyce kept talking to him, soothing him, reassuring him. It was killing her, seeing her son in such pain but she had to keep up a brave face, for all of them. Jonathan had a hard time looking at Will, he just clasped his hand, wishing he could do more. *Better get used to it*, he thought. *This is the new normal*. Will tried to smile, to let them know that he was ok. But he couldn't keep it up. His body was shutting down on him. He could feel it. But he didn't want the others to hurt for him.

They talked for hours until Will fell asleep and Jonathan reluctantly left.

---

Friday came, and Mike realized he would have to tell his mom what was going on in order to go to the hospital on Saturday. He found her in the living room, reading a book.

He sat down on the couch near her and she put her book down. "What is it Mike?"

"Umm...ok. Don't freak out mom, but Will is in the hospital."

"What? Why didn't you tell me? Since when? Oh my God, Joyce must be..."

"Mom, calm down. He's been in the hospital since last Tuesday."

"Why didn't you tell me honey?" Karen asked hurt. *Why do my kids never tell me anything? Where did I go wrong? Is it just me?*

Mike shrugged. "I don't know, I just... Whatever. He's doing really badly. He started chemotherapy." And suddenly his lips were trembling and he was crying in his mom's arms.

"Oh, Mike...I'm sorry, sweetie. You can talk to me. I'm so sorry. It's gonna be okay." Karen tried to comfort her son but he just shrugged.

"He's not ok. He might die." Karen held him a few more minutes until he pulled away.

"Umm, so anyway, " Mike continued, embarrassed about his outburst. "We spoke to Jonathan, and he said we could visit tomorrow. So, I asked Nancy and she already said she could drive us..."

"Yeah, honey, of course. I need to talk to Joyce first, though, and make sure that it's really ok."

Karen got the hospital's number and finally managed to track Joyce down.

"Hi Joyce, it's Karen." Mike sat there, but he could only hear one side of the conversation.

"I...I just found out about Will, Joyce, I, what can I say? You should just know that we're here for you and your family."

"Uh, huh. But really Joyce, if there's *anything*, and I mean anything, please don't hesitate to call. If you need a break, you need a night away from the hospital....anything."

"Please, no, no. Is Jonathan at home alone?"

"Tell him he can come over any time. For dinner, for anything. We're here for you."

"We'll all be praying for him, Joyce."

"Mike's been telling me that it's okay for him to visit tomorrow? Is that right? Is Will up to it?"

"Ok, I'll tell Mike that."

"Of course, Joyce, of course."

"Yes, take care. And remember anything at all."

Karen got off the phone and she had tears in her eyes. She wiped them away. "Oh, I can't even imagine..." she muttered, her hand over her eyes. She noticed Mike still standing there. "Oh, Joyce said that Will's really looking forward to you boys coming. So, it's ok to go. I guess Lucas and Dustin are going too?"

Mike nodded and ran off. Karen walked into the kitchen and began baking some stuff to send to the hospital.

---

The next morning, Nancy drove to the Byers house with the boys in the backseat. They met Jonathan outside and Nancy and the boys got into Joyce's car while Jonathan got into his. They tailed Jonathan all the way to the hospital, keeping up a running commentary on Nancy's poor driving skills. Finally they arrived at the hospital and Jonathan went ahead to check how Will was doing.

He walked out a few minutes later, giving them the thumbs up, and they all rushed to Will's room. The boys paused when they walked in, shocked at Will's deterioration but they soon recovered and rushed over to his bed, shoving each other as they tried to get their hands on him. When they had each gotten in a satisfactory hug, the boys started talking.

"Oh God, Will, what is that?" Dustin asked, looking at the bit of Will's scar that was visible. "It looks wicked!"

Will smiled, his first real smile in over a week. Over at the door, Jonathan smiled too. It was so nice to see Will happy again. He was more thankful now than ever that Will had some real friends.

Nancy hung back, not really having anything to say to Will. She looked over at Jonathan. "How's he really doing?"

Jonathan's smile faded. "Not good. It's just nice to see him like this again. He...he's been in a lot of pain the last few days. We don't even

know if the drugs are working yet."

Nancy moved closer to him. "Hey, they'll work. They'll....something will work. It has to."

Jonathan nodded.

"Uh, where's your mom? My mom asked me to give this stuff to her."

"I'll take it. Thank her for us."

Nancy nodded and handed Jonathan the stuff Karen had sent. Jonathan sat down and pulled out an English report he was working on. He did any homework in the hospital now. Nancy sat down near him.

"Is that Rayburn's essay?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jonathan laughed. "Been working on it for a while. I just can't concentrate long enough to finish it."

"Mind if I help?"

"Sure," Jonathan said. They spent the next hour working on the essay. Jonathan never knew that homework could be so much fun. He was a little uncomfortable though, having her sitting so close.

"Thanks," he said when they had finished.

"No problem," Nancy smiled. They turned to watch the heated campaign that was now in full swing.

"Lucas the Destroyer turns from the odd rock formation, and holds his torch out into the darkness, illuminating the Varguille advancing on him."

"Ok, I cast banishment." Lucas said automatically.

"Lucas raises his staff and mutters an ancient incantation, sending the creature back to the hell that it came out of. But what's that? A far off shriek. Suddenly three Thri-keen appear. They're hungry. Thirsting for fresh blood...."

"You'd think they'd have lost their taste for these kinds of games after meeting a real monster." Jonathan remarked to Nancy.

She laughed. "Boys."

"Uh, you're talking to one."

She blushed. "I mean younger brothers."

"Yeah," Jonathan said, looking back at the gang.

They watched them for a while, the game getting more and more animated. Joyce walked in after a while.

"Hi, boys." She said brightly.

"Oh, hi Ms. Byers," Dustin said. He was in middle of dispatching with an army of giant pedipalps.

"Thank you guys for coming. It means a lot."

"No problem," They answered and got back to the game. The afternoon passed comfortably though at one point, Will started vomiting and the room got really quiet as the nurse attended to it.

At around six, the head nurse, Janice, came in.

"Alright, guys. It's time to leave. Visiting hours are just about over and Will needs some rest."

The boys put up a fuss but eventually gave in. They said goodbye to Will and promised to be back soon. Will looked like he was on the verge of tears and Jonathan understood why. The day had been so cheerful, so unlike the last week and a half. It was like things were back to normal or as close as they could get.

Jonathan went over to his brother when the boys had left the room.

"Hey bud, they'll be back soon, ok?"

Will nodded but a few tears slipped out.

"Hey, Will, come on." Jonathan said hugging him. "What can I do to

make things better? What can I get you?"

Will didn't say anything.

"I'll bring the stereo, so you can listen to music." Jonathan said trying to think of something desperately. He was suddenly very aware of the fact that Will was barely twelve, hardly more than a kid. "I'll get you anything you want."

Joyce sat down by Will and took over as Jonathan said goodbye and turned to leave, when he saw Nancy watching him. He walked over to her.

"You're awesome with him."

Jonathan shook his head. "I'm barely doing anything for him, he's still miserable."

Now it was Nancy's turn to shake her head, exasperated. They left the room and continued to the car with the boys.

They piled in, Nancy in the passenger seat and the boys in the back. The car was quiet as everyone reflected on the visit.

After a half hour of silence, Dustin piped up, leaning into the front: "So are you guys together now?"

Jonathan swerved off the road for a second and quickly readjusted the car, his face red.

"Dustin!" Nancy shouted.

"What?" asked Mike. "It's a normal question. You're obviously not with Steve anymore."

"How do you even know that?" Nancy asked him, turning around in her seat.

"Uh...it's obvious. You don't mope around the house anymore. You don't look completely depressed anymore either."

Nancy blushed and turned to face the front.



"We all think you two should be together." Dustin said, grinning. He loved the uncomfortable looks on their faces.

"Yeah, Jonathan's a whole lot better than Steve!" Lucas added. "I mean, that guy uses a container of hair-gel each week alone."

Jonathan and Nancy looked at each other, smiling and blushing awkwardly. The boys in the back did not miss the exchange.

"Aww...that was so cute." Dustin said loving it.

They had to endure the boys' pointed comments the rest of the way home, but Jonathan was actually kind of glad because it had lightened the mood significantly. He dropped off Nancy and Mike, then Lucas and finally Dustin, before heading home himself.

## 9. Chapter 9

They got the results a couple of weeks later. The drugs were working, somewhat. They had halted the growth, for now, but the Thing (that's what they still called it) was very aggressive and kept fighting back. It was two steps forward and one step back. They'd make some progress, and then they'd have to stop treatment for a couple weeks, because Will was so weak. The Thing would respond and they'd be back, not to square one but to something pretty close to it.

After a couple of months they upped the dosage, to see if that would make any difference. It did. On Will. He grew so weak and so thin, that two weeks into the new regime, Joyce demanded that they go back to the lower dose. They were at a stalemate.

Jonathan settled into his new routine fairly quickly. He'd wake up, go to school, get home, drive out to the hospital and hang out there for a few hours, drive home, crash, and repeat. A couple days he'd work instead of going to the hospital, but it was all pretty much the same. Jonathan knew the hospital like the back of his hand. From Dr. Bradley, to Janice, the head nurse, to Patty, the girl in the next room who he rather suspected that Will had a thing for, to Reggie, the phlebotomist. He got used to it. He had to. The looks in school were nothing new; he'd had a lot of training for that. He and Nancy didn't hang out much; they didn't have many classes together, but they'd occasionally sit in his car by lunch and talk.

Mike, Dustin and Lucas came out every weekend, either Saturday or Sunday, or both, and stayed there for hours. They would spend all week devising a campaign and would play D&D until they needed to leave. The boys didn't really think of much else. Nancy would usually drive them out there and Mike suspected that she only agreed because she wanted to see Jonathan.

Hopper stayed over a couple nights a week, giving Joyce a much needed rest. She refused to leave Will alone for a minute. Joyce barely slept anymore, despite Jonathan's best efforts to get her to take a break.

Karen would also occasionally convince Joyce to let her take a night

by Will. But most of the time, she would do her part by sending food over to the hospital.

Even Mr. Clarke would come to visit every so often. He'd cornered Jonathan one day after school and asked if Will would be comfortable with him coming over. Mr. Clarke remembered when he'd taught Jonathan. The kid would not say a word during class but would get hundreds on every test. Will was a bit more talkative and was one of Mr. Clarke's favorite students.

The days stretched into weeks and the weeks stretched into months. Will's room at the hospital became more and more lived in. There was a large stereo with a stack of tapes near it. A bunch of movie posters had been hung on the wall. There were numerous get-well cards. There were some of Will's stuffed animals, including his stuffed elephant, Dumpy, that he'd had since he was three. There was his Darth Vader and Gandalf model, on a table beside his bed. There was a stack of chairs that were set up every weekend when the boys came to visit and a big box of D&D paraphernalia in the corner of the room. And there were pictures; loads and loads of them.

Will changed too. His hair gradually fell out and his body grew thinner and thinner as the chemotherapy took its toll. They all pretended not to notice but it was hard not to realize the dramatic decline...

---

Jonathan walked into Will's room to find his Mom muttering to herself one evening. *She's losing it*, he thought.

"Mom, what happened? Is everything ok?" he asked carefully.

"I don't know. I mean, what are we even doing all of this for? It's so pointless. Look at him," she said pointing at Will. "Look at his face. He's as good as dead, already. What's the point on making him suffer for nothing? I'm starting to think that it's just selfish of us to keep him hooked up to all these machines. The way he looks at me when he's conscious, it, it breaks my heart, again and again and again. I can't do this for much longer. Lonnie says we should let..."

"Lonnie?" Jonathan asked, understanding dawning on him.

"Yeah, yeah, he was just here, he went to have a drink."

*She must have called him, in a moment of weakness.* Red hot anger burned in Jonathan's chest. He hadn't felt this mad in a long, long time. *He thinks we should pull the plug? And then, Where is that bastard, I'm gonna kill him.*

"Hang in there, Mom, I'll be right back." Jonathan said as he ran out into the hallway. Janice stopped him. "What's wrong Jonathan?"

"Did you see a sleazy looking guy around Will's room?" Jonathan asked her.

"Matter of fact, I did. He looked like trouble, a little bit like my old boyfriend, Twain. He and I would get into all sorts of shit..."

Jonathan didn't have time to listen to tales of Janice's bad-guy boyfriends. "Which way did he go? Did you see?"

"Yeah, he went down that way, probably to the waiting room..."

Jonathan was off. He barged in and scanned the room for any sign of Lonnie. *There he is. Same old faded undershirt. Same old skinny leather pants. Same old hair gel. Same old day-old shave. Same old smug, sadistic expression.* Jonathan was shaking with rage. Seeing his dad brought a lot of emotion to the forefront. He hated him. He hated him for what he'd done to Joyce, and for what he'd done to their family. *And now he's trying to get Mom to give up on Will.*

He walked across the room.

"You! What are you doing here?!" Jonathan called out to him.

Lonnie looked up, surprised. "Oh, hey Jonathan. What's up?"

"What did you say to her? Why do you want Will dead? I know you hate him, but why the hell do you want to kill him?!"

"Jesus, Jonathan, calm down. There are people around."

"Oh, right. There are people around. When people are around, Lonnie's cool. Shame I lived with you for years then, where I got to see the real you." Jonathan couldn't control himself anymore. Years and years of abuse had taken their toll on him. The usually placid, quiet boy was gone; replaced by one who could no longer contain the pain, fear, and anger that had accumulated within him.

"What's gotten into you man?" Lonnie asked, taken aback, as he got up and punched Jonathan on the chest.

Jonathan exploded. "What's gotten into me? What's gotten into you? You disappear, not a word for ages, and now you show up in the hospital, while Will's dying and you try to convince Mom to give up! Trying to kill him off faster?!"

"Who's talking about killing?" Lonnie was getting scared. "Your Mom called me, alright? She was desperate, so I came over and told her what I think. Calm down, ok?" he reached out a hand but Jonathan caught it before it could reach him and shoved it back in his face.

"Calm down? Do you have any idea what this is like? That's your son in there! Do you even care that he's spent the last couple of months going through chemo? Do you care that he cries half the time? Do you know what it's like, seeing him like that, knowing that I'll probably lose him?" The tears were now coming despite Jonathan trying his hardest to stop them. "And you crawl in here, months later, only to mess things up even more, like always?!"

Lonnie stumbled back. Nobody shoved him. He recovered and stuck his face in Jonathan's. "What? And you think keeping him on chemo is any better?" He whispered. "You think you guys are doing a good job of handling this? You think you're being more humane? Well, I think you should get him off those drugs and let him die peacefully. He's gonna die anyway, there's nothing you or any of these doctors can do. And I think you guys are acting like a piece of shit, keeping him...."

Jonathan had heard enough. He reared back, channeling all of his anger, hate, and disgust, and he hit his father for the second time in his life. Lonnie collapsed back into his chair, holding his nose. Jonathan stood there, his chest heaving, looking down on the man he

hated, the man who was his father.

"You need to get out of here. And if you show your face in here again, then I swear I'll get a restraining order." Jonathan said and he walked out of the room. As he returned to Will's room, Jonathan's mind raced. *Did I just do that? Did I actually hit Lonnie? He deserved it. That guy! I can't believe he's my dad.*

He stopped outside Will's room and took a few deep breaths, calming himself down. Then he walked in. Joyce was still sobbing and muttering to herself. Jonathan sat down next to her and put his arm around her.

"Hey mom. It's ok. What did he tell you?"

Joyce looked at him, her eyes bloodshot. "I'm sorry baby, I shouldn't have called him. I don't know what came over me. It....it just happened. And then he was in here telling me how we're being selfish..."

Her voice broke and a fresh round of tears ensued.

"Mom. Mom, look at me. I got rid of him. He's not going to be bothering us for a while, ok. It's alright. Just forget what he said to you. It doesn't matter what he thinks. He couldn't care less about Will. We're not giving up now."

Slowly but surely, Joyce calmed down. But replacing her grief and confusion was anger. "Where is he? Did he leave? I'm going to go give him a piece of my mind."

She got up to leave but Jonathan pulled her down. "There's no need Mom. I already did. I...um...I...I punched him." Even now, fifteen minutes later, Jonathan couldn't believe that he'd actually done it. He smiled guiltily at his mom. "He was really awful, I don't know what got into me."

Joyce smiled back at him. "No, no. That's good. He deserved it."

---

That Saturday, they were all there. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, Nancy and Mrs. Wheeler, and Hopper and Mr. Clarke. They were all packed into Will's room and the noise level was rising. Mike and Lucas were recounting their latest fight with Troy and James. Dustin was discussing the effects of cyclophosphamide with Dr. Bradley. Karen was talking to Joyce. Hopper was sitting in the corner reading the paper. Nancy and Jonathan sat together, talking and watching everyone else.

Dr. Bradley finally got away from Dustin and had a word with Joyce before leaving the room. Joyce walked over to Hopper.

"Hopper, we need to discuss some things with the doctor." Joyce said to him over the din. They were followed out of the room by Jonathan.

They walked into Dr. Bradley's office and sat down.

"Ok. We need a new plan of action." The doctor began. "This isn't working. We're keeping it from metastasizing further but we're not moving. Will's getting weaker with each round of treatment. This is just not sustainable. I actually got an idea from that kid, Justin."

"Dustin," Jonathan said automatically.

"Yeah, Dustin. Smart kid." Dr. Bradley went on. "We were discussing the effects of some of the drugs and he asked me why we don't cut out all the side drugs and just try one drug at a time instead of using a whole cocktail. Now, it's obviously not as straightforward as that. There are four or five that we have to use, regardless. But it got me thinking..."

He outlined a whole new plan of action that included a couple of more surgeries, lighter bursts of chemo, combined with some targeted doses of radiation. Joyce's head spun as she imagined Will going through all of this. Hopper though was following along, and kept asking questions until he was satisfied.

"Are you the uncle?" Dr. Bradley asked him suddenly.

"No. Just a...a friend, who's been here." Hopper answered evenly.

Jonathan didn't say a word until the doctor had left. "Does he know what he's talking about?" he asked Hopper.

"Yeah, I think he does. He's a good man, Bradley."

Hopper shortened it for Joyce and she nodded along. They decided to go for it. After all, what choice did they really have?



## 10. Chapter 10

Jonathan was preparing to leave to the hospital for the umpteenth time it seemed. He did a final sweep of his room, checking to see if he had missed anything, when suddenly he spotted his camera. It had been collecting dust under his desk. He hadn't used it since...*Since Will's hospitalization*, Jonathan thought. He grabbed it and left, not knowing what exactly he was going to do with it.

---

Nancy was looking for Jonathan. They'd made up to go to the hospital after school with Mike. She checked the parking lot, his car was still there. Nancy walked from room to room, looking for him. Then it hit her. She walked into the dark room, with its eerie red light, and stopped short, looking at the pictures that were drying. Jonathan froze when she walked in but then relaxed when he saw it was her. The photos were all of the hospital, and of medical equipment, and of Will, and of Jonathan's mom and various nurses with Will. They were beautiful in her opinion.

"You took all of these?" She asked unnecessarily. *Obviously he did. Why did I just say that?*

He nodded as he hung up a photo of Will with a girl who also had no hair and he put another picture into the tray. Nancy took his hand. He didn't pull away. They stood there and just looked at the images as they dried.

"You know, they're amazing. I...I don't know how I'd deal with this, if it was me."

Jonathan blinked.

"Jonathan?"

"Yeah?"

"Why aren't you in any of them?"

Jonathan pulled his hand away. He suddenly seemed in a hurry to leave. "How can I be in a picture I take?"

"You know what I mean."

Jonathan didn't answer and he seemed to get even more edgy. "I need to go."

Nancy wasn't giving up so fast. She was about to respond when she caught sight of the picture that had just been developed. Jonathan was trying to block her view of it but she gently forced him aside.

"Oh my God." The picture was of Jonathan and Will and it broke her heart. Jonathan was holding Will up; you could tell that Will could barely sit on his own. But it was the love that was evident in the picture that got to Nancy. It was the sweetest and the saddest and the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, all at once. She turned to Jonathan, tears in her eyes, and threw her hands around him. He tensed but didn't force her off. She pulled away eventually and Jonathan, not meeting her gaze, spoke.

"I...he just started his new treatment, and it's really hard on him. I realized that...I just wanted a picture of us in case he...in case..." He couldn't finish.

Nancy took his hand again and squeezed it.

He hung up the picture and they waited some more. Suddenly the door burst open.

"Oh Gosh, look what we walked in on!"

It was Tommy and Carol. They looked around and started laughing. Jonathan hastily gathered up the photos and tried to leave but his way was blocked by Tommy.

"Excuse me."

"What? I just wanna see your pictures." Tommy said and he wrestled them from Jonathan's hands.

"Give them back." Jonathan was not leaving without them.

"Yeah, in a moment." Tommy said, grinning. He started rifling through them, making some very pointed remarks to Carol. Each picture brought a fresh round of laughter from the two.

"Oh! Check this one out, it's the Mom."

"Shut up!" Jonathan said, his jaw set.

"Look at her! She looks like she crept out of the asylum."

"Shut up!" Jonathan couldn't take it much longer, and you could see a muscle twitching in his neck.

"And here's the freak kid with a girl. You think they're like screwing in the hospital? That would be kind of..."

But he didn't finish the sentence. Nancy, who'd been watching quietly, walked over and socked him in the eye.

"You need to *shut* your f#%&! mouth!" She yelled as he stumbled back.

Tommy looked at her, a ghastly smile spreading across his face. Then he grabbed her by the front of her sweater and forced her up against the nearest wall. "Did I insult your psycho boyfriend?" he whispered. Nancy could feel his breath on her face as she struggled to break free.

Jonathan had seen enough. He pulled Tommy off of Nancy and slammed him against a table.

"Don't touch her ever again," he muttered, before he poured everything he had into his fist and slammed it into the side of Tommy's head, knocking him out. Carol rushed over to him and, seeing that he was unconscious, she turned around on Jonathan and started yelling at him.

Jonathan ignored her and hurried over to Nancy.

"Are you ok?" he asked putting a steadying arm around her.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. Just a little shocked. I never thought he'd attack a girl."

"Yeah, that's a new low for him and that's saying something." Jonathan gathered up the pictures and they left the room.

*What's gotten into me? That's the second time I've hit someone in as many weeks,* Jonathan mused as he drove out of the parking lot.

---

"Ok, here, you try this one."

It was 8 o'clock on a Thursday in June, and Jonathan was doing some math with Will. He was trying his hardest to keep up in school; he didn't want to be left back a year.

Jonathan got up and walked over to the window as Will did some examples. *Jailhouse Rock* was playing in the background, and Jonathan was watching the sun set. The peaceful atmosphere was so incongruous with the sickness in the room and it got Jonathan thinking. *I can't believe Will's gonna be stuck here this summer, maybe I can convince the doctors to let me take him on a few trips. He's been stuck in the hospital for over four months....*

"Why is Dad not here?"

Jonathan paused, looking out the window. *Where had that come from?*

He turned around to face Will. "What?"

"Why is Dad not here? You said he came to my funeral when I was missing. Shouldn't he be here now?" Will asked, his math homework forgotten. Will's eyes bore into Jonathan's.

Jonathan walked over to Will and sat down near him. "Dad should be a lot of things that he's not."

"Does he know that I'm in the hospital?"

"Yeah. He knows."

"Then why..."

Jonathan sighed. Will knew that Lonnie was a deadbeat, he usually wouldn't ask Jonathan anything like this. But Will was at a very weak and vulnerable point, where all his old fears came to the surface. It was like he was six or seven again, in that regard. "Will, you can't rely on Dad for anything. He's irresponsible. He's an alcoholic. He's useless, at best. I've learned to live with it and you're also gonna have to come to terms with it."

Will looked at him, his eyes round and trusting, and Jonathan realized how harsh he'd been. He put a hand on Will's shoulder and continued.

"Will, I think that deep down he probably does care about you. But he's not a healthy person. We're...we're better off without him. He wouldn't make you feel any better, in fact he'd probably just make you feel worse."

Will looked down and suddenly blurted out: "Did he leave because of me?" Jonathan could tell by the way he said it that he'd wanted to ask the question for years. *Do we have to do this now?* Jonathan thought desperately. *Why can't Mom handle stuff like this?* But Jonathan knew that Will would never ask Joyce this stuff, it was up to him to handle these questions.

"Will, look at me." Will obliged and looked up at him. "He didn't leave because of you. It had nothing to do with you, ok? Don't ever blame yourself. If anything, he left because of me. He...everything got a lot better when he left."

Will nodded. "What did you do?"

"It doesn't matter. Dad's a coward. I was getting older and started fighting back, and he didn't like that."

They sat in silence for a moment. "Do you hate him?" Will asked.

"I...yeah, most of the time I do. Do you miss him? Do you wish you had a decent dad?" Jonathan asked him.

Will shrugged. "If it was just me and Mom, then yeah, I would. But I have you."

He said it so innocently, and so matter-of-factly, that Jonathan smiled despite the gravity of the situation. Will smiled back and soon their smiles turned into laughs and they couldn't stop.

It felt good to laugh, for both of them, in that room that was so full of tension, and of hurting, and of dread. Jonathan could see in recent weeks how Will was declining. How he tried to keep up a brave, happy-go-lucky face, but that he couldn't keep it up much longer. More and more often, he'd burst into tears, seemingly in middle of nowhere. Jonathan and Joyce would sit with him, trying to calm him down. But slowly, with each outburst, their own resolve broke down further.

---

Joyce watched her two boys through the glass of the door. She couldn't hear what they were saying but she observed them nonetheless. Her heart expanded as she watched them interact. *They're beautiful, my boys. I'm lucky to have kids like them.*

But mixed in with the love was the fear. *What do I do if I lose him? How will Jonathan manage? Hell, how will I manage? If only I had someone else to deal with this...*

But as she watched, she saw the two burst out laughing and she knew that even if she could, she wouldn't change a thing. She felt tears run down her cheeks. Her family was perfect just the way it was.

## 11. Chapter 11

Hopper, Joyce and Jonathan were once again in Dr. Bradley's office. Today was the day of reckoning. The results of the new treatment were in and they were waiting for Dr. Bradley's report. Joyce and Hopper were smoking like steam engines, and Jonathan paced the room, wringing his hands. This was the end of the line. If this didn't work, there was no alternative.

Dr. Bradley walked in and sat down. "Have a seat."

They obliged and looked at him, fearing the worst.

"Alright guys. Good news. It's working." They all let out a sigh of relief, allowing themselves to breath, and the doctor continued. "We're pushing it back and at this rate, we're going to win. But, we're not out of the woods yet, far from it. This thing can act up at any time and we need to remain vigilant. Will seems to respond better to radiation. It's not as taxing on his body as chemo. It may be slower, but it's worth it overall, so we'll be incorporating more of that into his treatment. There's still months left and it's not going to be an easy few months. But, with any luck, we'll beat it. It's looking a lot better than it did five months ago." He smiled at the three, grateful that he could finally deliver some good news. Dr. Bradley genuinely cared about all his patients but something about this family had touched him and he'd spent many sleepless nights trying to come up with the best treatment for Will.

They asked some questions and then Dr. Bradley got up to leave. Jonathan stopped him at the door.

"Um, hey, Dr. Bradley, I was wondering if I would be able to take Will out of the hospital over the next few months?"

Dr. Bradley shook his head. "I don't think so. Right now it's impossible, it's just too risky. But I'll let you know if and when you can, ok?"

Jonathan nodded and he left the room.

"-gonna call Karen, I promised to let her know what's going on." Joyce was saying.

---

Mike, Lucas and Dustin sat at the Wheeler's kitchen table, eating lunch. School was out, and they were very antsy. The boys were waiting on news about Will and there was a nervous energy in the house.

Dustin was banging out the Darth Vader theme song, with a spoon, on his empty plate, Mike was playing with his scrambled eggs, and Lucas was sitting quietly, shaking his foot and occasionally letting out a sigh.

"Will you stop it?!" Lucas finally burst out at Dustin.

"What?!"

"Stop that tapping. It's getting on my nerves!"

"Oh, yeah? What about your sighing? Every five seconds we all have to listen..."

But just then, the phone rang. The boys jumped up and raced across the room but it was Karen who got there first. With Holly in one arm, she picked up the phone, hesitantly.

"Hello?" The boys could only hear one side of the conversation.

"Hi, Joyce. Uh...so did you get the results?"

There was a long pause and everyone held their breath.

"Oh, wow! Oh, Joyce, I...I'm just so happy for you."

"This is great. You deserve some good news."

"Yeah. Yeah of course. I'll tell the boys, they're standing right here."

"Ok. Ok. We're all just so happy for you."



"Absolutely, we'll be in touch. Take care, Joyce."

Karen hung up and turned to the boys, a wide smile across her face. "It's working. The treatment is working!"

They started cheering and roaring. Mike was so relieved that he hugged his mom in front of the other two. They carried on like this for a while, when Nancy came downstairs.

"What is going on down here?! I'm trying to relax and I hear you yelling like a bunch of hyenas?! Can you guys just..."

But Mike interrupted her. "The treatment is working! Will's gonna be ok!" And when Nancy heard this, she herself joined in the celebration.

---

From that day on, Will's hospital room took on a whole new feel. Gone were the forced smiles and tearful goodbyes. Gone were the long, somber days and the dreaded nights. Gone was the fear, misery, and despair of the past months.

In its place was hope. The fake smiles became real. The days became brighter and full of laughter. The nights were shorter and less dark. The pain that Will underwent now had a purpose. They could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

They all pitched in, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Nancy, Karen, Mr. Clarke, Hopper, and of course Jonathan and Joyce, to make Will feel like he wasn't missing out on the summer. They brought the fun to him and in the process, to the dozens of other kids in the hospital.

Now that school was out, Mike and the gang visited nearly every day. Whether it was Nancy, or Mrs. Wheeler, or Jonathan, or even Hopper who drove them out there, the boys would stay nearly all day. They knew the hospital like the back of their hand and would annoy all the doctors and nurses as they raced around the hallways. Will's room became the place to be in the pediatric cancer ward. The Dungeons and Dragons games that the boys played got wilder and wilder, as

other kids whom Will had befriended, would join in the campaigns. Nancy's guitar earned a spot in the room, and they would spend hours putting on makeshift concerts, much to the delight and chagrin of the hospital staff. Each week, new x-rays were hung up, showing the monster in Will retreating. Dozens of new pictures also went up, of Will and the Hawkins gang as well as with his fellow patients and various hospital staff-members.

Mr. Clarke had arranged for Will to be able to take exams in the hospital and he spent hours going over the material for many subjects with him. Hopper didn't like all the noise and the people so he mostly helped out by staying overnight, two to three times a week. Besides, he was loath to leave Callaghan in charge at the station all day.

Nancy found it to be the most meaningful, and in a way, fun, summer that she'd ever had. She thought of the alternative, hanging out at Steve's pool, and she felt her stomach turn. Nancy had actually caught Steve and Allyson making out and was pleased to find that it meant nothing to her. But there was still a certain frustration when she thought of Jonathan. They'd spent hours upon hours together and had gotten pretty tight, yet he still tensed whenever she got too close, and doubly so if she touched him. There were so many times that she'd wanted to kiss him, to hold him, but she held out for fear of damaging their relationship. Nancy cared a whole lot about him, (in the back of her mind she acknowledged that she loved him) and she knew he felt the same way about her but there was something holding them back that she couldn't figure out.

Joyce finally began to relax and started to spend many nights at home which helped her state of mind immensely. Karen took nights with Will and found herself growing fonder and fonder of the sweet, intelligent boy. It was very hard not to. She was also extremely proud of how both Nancy, but Mike in particular handled the situation. Her kids were growing up and she liked what she saw. *Maybe I'm not such a bad parent after all.*

Jonathan was overwhelmed by the love and support of the others. He'd gone through life relying on and trusting no one. Up to this point, his life had consisted of two people; his mom and Will. Jonathan had convinced himself that he despised everyone else; that he didn't need them, but the truth was that he was afraid. Afraid of

more rejection and more pain. This ordeal made him realize that he needed these people, he needed them nearly as much as he needed Will and his mom. Every time Will laughed, Jonathan's heart got a little lighter and he was thankful for everyone in that grim hospital room. He wished he could find the words to thank them too, but it was ok if he couldn't, they understood. There was one thing weighing on his mind, though, and that was Nancy. He spent hours debating what to do, what to tell her. He wanted to be with her, he wanted so desperately to confide in her, to rely on her, to take care of her. He wanted her so much that it hurt every second he held back, but that made him even more hesitant. He was absolutely terrified of hurting her and he didn't trust himself to be in a relationship. *I'll have to talk to her one of these days. It's not fair what I'm doing.*

---

September was coming and with it, Will's 13th birthday. Nancy, Jonathan and the boys spent a couple of weeks planning a huge party for him at the hospital, along with the hospital faculty. They wanted to include all the other kids as well.

The big day arrived and everyone got to the hospital early to prepare. Will only knew that Jonathan and Joyce were there and he thought that he was going to be doing treatment in the afternoon.

When they began to wheel him to the radio-therapy room, he knew something was wrong. They were headed in the wrong direction. Suddenly, a couple of doors to his right were thrown open and he was wheeled into the big conference room that the hospital used for events. He was greeted by six dozen or so people all singing Happy Birthday. Tears came to his eyes and Jonathan put his arm around Will, steadying him.

"I...I completely forgot that today was my birthday." Will told him.

"Yeah, but we didn't."

Will was overwhelmed. He couldn't believe that this was all for him. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas ran over and they each gave him a bone-crushing hug. Joyce leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"I love you honey, happy birthday. You'll be out of here soon."

Will nodded, but he was torn. "I'm gonna miss everyone though. Are we gonna be able to come visit?"

"Sure, baby."

Will was wheeled around the room and everyone, from doctors, to nurses, to patients, to the janitor, all congratulated him. They loved the wide-eyed, kind boy who had brightened up their lives over the past seven months. Patty, the girl in the room next to Will's, came over and kissed him right on the lips. She pulled away with a shy smile and Will turned beet red. Mike, Dustin and Lucas went from whooping to gagging to laughing hysterically.

*I was right*, thought Jonathan from where he sat observing. He felt an elbow in his side and he turned to see Nancy sitting right beside him. She was nodding her head meaningfully in Will and Patty's direction.

Jonathan looked away, an uncomfortable smile playing on his lips. "You want us to finally kiss at my brother's birthday party in a cancer ward? That would be typical." But he wouldn't look at her.

Nancy didn't force the issue, but there was some strain between them for the rest of the party.

The majority of the kids couldn't eat any cake or candy, so the affair consisted mostly of games and music. Mike and the boys had a good time organizing a D&D tournament, which was won by a 9 year old kid from South Bend who apparently knew a thing or two about the game.

There was a moment that none of them would forget, when the parents of a girl who'd been in the hospital for two years came over to thank them. They recounted how today was the first time they'd seen their daughter smile in nearly eight months. There was not a dry eye in the room, except for Dustin, who was stuffing his face with chocolate cake and Lucas, who was yelling at him. The party slowly died down and the other patients were returned to their rooms. They all made their way back to Will's room and hung around for a while, chatting contentedly. Hopper walked in at half past eight to take the

night shift and Joyce accosted him.

"Where were you? We were expecting you at the party!"

"Yeah Joyce, you know I don't do parties."

They all laughed and then prepared to leave.

"That was wonderful." Karen told Joyce. "When is Will expected to get out?"

"If everything goes right, then they hope within the month." Joyce answered. "That way, he'll be able to catch up in school fairly easily."

Karen nodded as she scooped up Holly. "Alright boys, time to go."

They were just heading out the door when everything fell apart.

## 12. Chapter 12

Will started convulsing, his eyes rolled in their sockets. He gasped for air, his face losing all color. All hell had broken loose. It seemed like every machine in the room started beeping at the same time. Someone ran into the hallway and shouted for a doctor. Jonathan and Joyce ran over to Will. Nancy cried out. The boys were yelling. Karen kept her head and ushered the boys and Nancy out of the room as numerous nurses and doctors rushed in.

"What happened to him?" Hopper yelled above the fray. It was déjà vu. He could just see Sarah in the bed, her vitals zeroing out.

"I don't know, looks like some kind of seizure." Someone yelled, pointlessly.

A nurse was trying to clear the room but Joyce was having none of it and she begged Hopper to stay too. Jonathan left with the promise that someone would update him on what was happening. He didn't want to be in there anyway. He paced the hallways for a few minutes before heading to the family room.

He walked in and everyone rushed over to him.

Jonathan shook his head. "I don't know." He said simply. They stood around awkwardly until, one by one, they sat down in the green-gray armchairs they were all so familiar with.

The minutes ticked by. Every so often, one of them would get up and pace around the room for a while before sitting back down. Holly squirmed in her mother's arms. Jonathan, Nancy, Mike and Karen were completely quiet, and whether it was pacing, a bathroom break, or just fidgeting, Dustin and Lucas wouldn't stop moving. The minutes turned into hours. Holly dozed off and the rest of them grew tired. The room was warm and Mike found himself nodding off, when suddenly, the doors opened and a nurse walked in. They were all instantly alert and they jumped up, eager for news.

The nurse walked over to the troupe and addressed Jonathan. "It's touch and go right now. Pray." she said shortly, before hurrying out.

Jonathan felt himself breaking. He gasped for breath, his vision blurring. He stifled a sob and escaped the room as fast as he could.

Karen immediately put Holly down and headed after him but Nancy stopped her.

"I'll go." she said and Karen nodded.

Nancy left the room and raced after Jonathan. She hurried along the winding hallways, she ran down the dingy hospital staircases, she ran along more hallways, weaving around and dodging various hospital employees, she dashed across the lobby, and finally burst out into the warm and clammy late-summer night. Nancy scanned the area in both directions. She could see no sign of Jonathan. *Damn it! Where is he?* She needed to get to him.

She ran up the street, looking both ways. *No sign of him here.*

She tried the other way. *No sign of him here either.*

She ran through the plaza between two of the hospital's buildings and came around to the back, where the ambulances were dispatched from. A couple of EMT's were hanging out in the back of an open vehicle.

Nancy walked over. "Did you just see a boy pass through here?"

A fat guy, smoking a cigarette, answered. "Yeah, sure did. He looked upset."

"Which way did he go? Did you see?"

They pointed out the direction and Nancy was off. She found him in a shadowy alley between the hospital and a large medical office building. He was sitting on the ground, hands clenched around his legs and his forehead pressed up against his knees. His black t-shirt was stretched tight across his hunched back and Nancy could see that he was shaking.

She walked over to him and leaned down. "Jonathan."

He jumped and looked up and, in the dim light, Nancy could see tear

streaks on his face.

"Nancy, please. I need to be alone now." He whispered, looking away.

"No you don't!" *I'm not letting him get away with this*, Nancy thought. *I'm going to make him talk.* "What you need to do is talk to someone."

She crouched down and cupped his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. "You need to talk to me. And I'm not leaving until you do." Then she sat down beside Jonathan and put an arm around him, daring him to shrug it off. He didn't. Jonathan could feel his resolve cracking; he could feel the wall he'd built around himself coming down. Before he knew it, he was sobbing in front of Nancy.

"I.....I'm...I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to-" He mumbled, his voice hoarse.

Nancy gripped him tighter. "Shut up Jonathan. Shut up."

Jonathan put his head down and cried. He cried for Will, and his mom. He cried for Nancy, and Mike, and Eleven, the girl he barely knew but loved nonetheless. And he cried for himself; something he hadn't allowed himself to do in a long time. Nancy sat next to him, looking away. She couldn't stand to see him as well as hear him. It broke her heart.

"I...I can't lose him." Jonathan said when he'd calmed down enough to speak. "I tried so hard to protect him and now...I honestly don't know what I'll do if he...if he dies. He...he means everything to me." Jonathan's voice shook and he struggled to hold back more tears. A moment passed. "And please don't tell me that I have to be strong for my mom. You have no idea what I..." he trailed off, and looked fixedly at the bricks of the opposite building.

"What, Jonathan? Tell me." Jonathan looked at her, his heart pounding. Nancy saw the indecision in his eyes, and then she saw him make up his mind.

He moved away from her and started pulling up his shirt.

*What is he doing?* Nancy thought wildly. Then she gasped. There were three nasty looking, but faded scars running down the length of his



back. "Oh my God, Jonathan. Did your..."

Jonathan nodded before she even finished the sentence. Nancy reached out to touch one of them and felt him shudder at the contact. She pulled back and he quickly tugged his shirt down.

Jonathan's voice quivered as he spoke again." I...I...I took that and more for her. She doesn't know and I...I don't ever plan on telling her. It would break her."

Nancy was feeling quite inadequate. *What do you even say to someone in this situation? What do I tell him?*

Jonathan continued. He was crying openly now and Nancy's hand was back around his shoulder. "He..uh...he started on Will and that's...when I fought back. I remember it like it was yesterday. I got him in the eye and I threatened to call the cops. That's...that's when he backed off. He's a f\*\*\*\*\* coward."

Nancy wiped the tears from his face with her free hand. "Hey. You're one hell of a person, Jonathan."

Jonathan shook his head. "No. I failed him anyway. He's dying right now and there's nothing I can do."

"You didn't fail, Jonathan. I get it, you think that-"

Jonathan suddenly pulled away and stood up. Nancy followed suit.

"No you don't. You don't get it at all." Jonathan said.

"Actually I do! I know you feel guilty and you feel responsible for what happened to Will. I get it, Jonathan!"

"Oh, really?" He answered heatedly.

"Yeah, really. I felt the same damn way about Barb, ok! She's dead!"

"Yeah! And Will might be heading the same way right now! He might already be dead, for all I know he died while I'm spilling my guts to you out here!"

Nancy had no idea why they were now yelling at each other; all she knew was that she couldn't stand to see Jonathan beating himself up for a second longer. "There's nothing you could have done!"

"Yeah, maybe there wasn't, but I should have at least been there!"

"How would that have helped?! That monster would've just taken you both! Is that what you'd want?!"

"You know what? Yeah! At least I would've been with him."

"Are you serious right now?! Think of your Mom! Imagine both her kids going missing! Do you even hear yourself?!"

Jonathan didn't answer. He just stared back at her, his eyes bloodshot.

And suddenly Nancy was mad. Mad at everyone. She was mad at herself, and her parents, and Steve and Tommy, and Jonathan's mom and dad, and Hawkins lab and the monster and the government and the CIA. And she was mad at Jonathan himself, for shouldering all the blame.

"This! Is! Not! Your! Fault!" she said, punctuating each word with a small punch to Jonathan's chest. She looked at him, tears flowing freely and she couldn't take it anymore. The despair and the hope, and the strength and the love in his eyes were too much for her to bear.

*Goddammit, I love him. To hell with it!* Nancy leaned over and pressed her lips to his. She felt him freeze, but she didn't care, and she threw her arms around him and kissed him harder. For a moment, Nancy feared that she'd made a big mistake. But then she felt Jonathan's hand on her neck and she felt his other hand slip around her waist. His hands trembled but he kissed her back.

They stayed that way for a while, losing themselves in each other, and coming up for breath a couple of times. Finally, Jonathan pulled back, a shy smile spreading across his face as he looked down. Nancy could see fresh tears in his eyes but they were the good kind.

"Um, I...we should go back. Will..." Jonathan said awkwardly. They

looked at each other and slowly their tentative smiles turned into grins and soon they were laughing. Nancy had never heard Jonathan laugh. It felt good to hear it, and what made it better was that she was the reason for it. She could feel his lips on hers, and her stomach was doing somersaults, as if in celebration. But eventually the laughter stopped and they were brought back to reality.

"We need to get back in there and see what's happening." Jonathan said, the knot of fear settling back in his stomach.

"Yeah, go ahead. I'll be there in a second." Nancy wanted to give Jonathan some space. He nodded and walked off, heading back to the hospital. She watched him go, her mind racing, and a faint smile playing on her lips.

---

Jonathan walked back into the family room where Mrs. Wheeler and the kids were waiting.

"Any news?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

"Yeah," Karen answered. "They're operating on him. The nurse said they found another growth on his lungs."

Jonathan nodded. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry Jonathan." Karen said sincerely.

"No, it's ok." He sat down.

"Uh, do you know where Nancy is?"

Jonathan blushed. "Yeah, she said she'll be a minute."

They sat in silence for a while when Nancy walked in. She sat down near Jonathan. She wanted to let him know that what had just happened was not a freak incident; that she had meant it.

---

Jonathan woke up with a start. *I must have dozed off.* He became conscious of the fact that Nancy was holding his hand. He started to pull it away but then stopped when he realized that she was sleeping; her head leaning on his shoulder. He shifted slightly, getting more comfortable. Jonathan looked around and saw Karen looking at him, a strange expression on her face. Jonathan's face reddened and he looked away. The three boys and Holly were all sleeping, sprawled out across the room. Jonathan checked his watch. It was past four. He sat there, trying his hardest to avoid glancing at Mrs. Wheeler. Finally he could take it no more. He got up carefully, trying not to disturb Nancy, and walked over to Karen.

"Anything?" he asked.

Karen shook her head. "Nothing."

"You look really tired. You don't want to get home, or..."

Karen waved him off. "Please, Jonathan. We're here to stay. You think I'm going to leave at a time like this? Besides, the boys wouldn't let." She said gesturing at their sleeping form.

Jonathan nodded and turned to go, he needed an update.

"Jonathan."

He turned back. Mrs. Wheeler was looking at him intently. "It's ok." She said.

"What?"

Karen nodded her head at Nancy. "Nancy and you, it's ok."

"Oh, uh, um..."

Karen smiled. "She's happy, this way. I've seen her before, with other guys. You're good for her."

Jonathan bit his lip, extremely uncomfortable. "Ok, um, thanks. I'm gonna go see what I can find out."

"Good luck."

## 13. Chapter 13

Jonathan paced the hallways outside Will's room. *Why did I do it? Why did I do it? Why the hell did I do it?* The reasonable part of his mind kicked in. *You didn't do it, she did.* Even now, hours later, he could feel her lips on his and his stomach was still in knots. He'd actually felt happy, at least for a little bit. *Stop it! Stop dreaming!*

There was also the guilt. While he and Nancy were making out, Will was fighting for his life. Jonathan was disgusted with himself. *I should've been in that room with Mom. I should be there right now.*

Jonathan shook his head, trying to clear his mind, but he couldn't really stop his heart from feeling lighter. *What's wrong with you? Will's dying and you're feeling good just because a girl kissed you? Pathetic.* The voice in his head wouldn't stop. Jonathan pounded his forehead with his fist. A passing nurse looked at him strangely.

"Everything ok, hon?" She asked.

"Yeah, I...I'm fine."

*Get a grip.* Jonathan opened the door to Will's room only to find it empty. *Obviously they're not operating on him in here.* He wandered along the hallways, poking his head into various rooms. Finally Jonathan spotted Val, a nurse he knew.

"Hey Val, do you know where Will is?" he asked.

"Uh...yeah, I'll show you. I don't think they'll let you in, though."

They took the elevator up a couple floors. "Do you know how he's doing?"

Val shook her head. "Sorry. But I do know he's a fighter. If anyone can make it, he can."

Jonathan nodded but he was sick of all the platitudes and reassurances. He didn't care that Will was 'tough', that 'this has to work', that 'he'll be ok', or that 'he'll get through this'. He just wanted his brother back.

They arrived outside an operating room and Jonathan could see many doctors and nurses working inside, through the glass in the door.

"Wait here. I'll go in and see what's up, ok?" Val told him. She went inside and, as the door closed behind her, Jonathan caught a whiff of the sterile, sanitized smell he hated so much. A couple minutes passed and then Val came back out of the room.

"Alright, you can go in, but you gotta wear these," she handed him some gloves, a mask and a set of scrubs. "You shouldn't get too close to him anyway. Good luck."

Jonathan felt foolish but he put the stuff on, then he walked in. What struck him immediately was how quiet it was. Sure, there was talking, but Jonathan always imagined the operating room as being extremely chaotic. He looked around. It took a while to spot his mom. She was standing out of the way, with Hopper at her side. Jonathan walked over.

"Hi, Mom. How you doing?" It was awkward talking through the masks and it took Joyce a moment to realize who he was.

"Oh, Jonathan." She hugged him to her and pulled back. "They found some kind of massive growth on his lungs and they're trying to remove it now. I don't know what's going to happen..."

Jonathan nodded and stood with her. She was remarkably calm under the circumstances. Jonathan was thankful that they didn't have a good view of Will. He didn't really think he could stand to see his brother's chest cut open. The minutes ticked by as they watched in silence.

"I'm gonna go tell the others. We'll all be in the waiting room downstairs." Jonathan finally told Joyce after an hour or so. Jonathan left the room and removed the mask and gloves. He took the elevator back down to the sixth floor and walked into the waiting room. Jonathan could see that it was getting light outside. Karen was sitting in the same position; it looked like she hadn't moved. Nancy and Mike were still sleeping. Holly was standing by the window and staring out.

*Does it really have to be us two again?* Thought Jonathan warily.

"Uh, where's Lucas and Dustin?" he asked, trying to relieve the tension a bit.

"Oh, they went to get some food." She sounded really tired.

"They're still operating on Will. Uh...you should probably get home. I mean, it's nearly six."

"No, I'm not leaving until we know how Will's doing." Karen answered looking at him. "I've been praying for him for nearly eight months. I need to know what's going on."

"Does your husband even know..."

Karen gasped. "Oh my God! I completely forgot about Ted. I made Lucas and Dustin call home but I myself..." She got up. "I need to make a call." She turned to leave but stopped, looking back.

"I'll watch her," said Jonathan, gesturing at Holly. Karen nodded and left the room. He sat down near the windows, trying not to look at, or think about, Nancy. Holly came over to him and sat down on his lap, babbling about horses and unicorns. At least that's what it sounded like.

"Are you a doctor?" Holly asked him suddenly.

"What?" Jonathan realized that he was still wearing scrubs and he chuckled. "No, not a doctor." *Little kids are funny. I need to hang around them a little more.*

"I'm bored." Holly told him. Jonathan looked around the room. Other than all the chairs, tables and some magazines, it was bare. Then he remembered all the drawing equipment they had brought for Will. He stood up and picked up Holly. "Come on, we'll get you something."

They got to Will's room and Jonathan opened the draw they used to stash some games and Will's drawing gear. He wondered if Will would ever use any of it again. Holly picked out some crayons and they headed back to the waiting room. When they walked in, Dustin, Lucas and Mike were stuffing their faces. Jonathan suddenly realized

how hungry he was. He hadn't eaten anything since the party the day before. *That was yesterday?* He thought. *It feels like a week.*

Jonathan set Holly up at a table and walked over to the boys.

"So what's happening?" Dustin asked in between bites of his cheeseburger.

Jonathan gave them the rundown. "I'm starving, Can I...?"

"Sure." Mike said and Jonathan helped himself to some chicken nuggets and fries. They all ate and were soon joined by Nancy. Mrs. Wheeler walked in and joined in on the impromptu food fest as well. It was a good thing Dustin had bought so much food, although he had probably intended to eat it all himself.

"Mom, did you sleep at all?" Nancy asked her, concerned. Karen shook her head. "Come on Mom, you need to sleep. You can go home with Holly and we'll..."

Karen waved her off. "It's ok, I'm really not tired."

They finished eating and Jonathan was about to go check on Will, when the doors opened and Hopper walked in. He collapsed in a chair and rubbed his eyes. They crowded around him, eager for news.

Hopper yawned and then spoke: "Well, the surgery's over. They got most of it out. It really screwed around with his lungs though, and they don't know what condition he's gonna be in when he wakes up. He can't breathe on his own at this point, so he's on a ventilator. That's pretty much it. He's alive, but in bad shape."

They weren't sure how to react, so they just kind of exchanged hugs and relieved smiles. Given the scare of the night before, the fact that Will was alive was good enough.

"Oh," Hopper continued, addressing Jonathan. "Your mom wants to see you. She's up there with Will, room 806, or maybe it was 807, I don't know."

Jonathan nodded and left.



Hopper looked around. "Is that a cheeseburger I smell?"

Dustin nodded at him guiltily. "Yeah, but they're all gone."

Hopper pulled out a wad of bills and handed it to Dustin. "Get me two burgers, a coke, and uh...hmm...a slice of pizza." Dustin stared at him blankly. "Well, get to it!" Hopper growled and the boys ran off.

Hopper lit a cigarette, ignoring the 'No Smoking' signs all over the room. Karen looked on disapprovingly but held her tongue. "So, uh... how's everyone holding up?" Hopper asked, breaking the silence that had descended upon the room once the boys had left. When no one answered, he just sighed and put his feet up.

---

Jonathan found the room and walked in.

"Hi, Mom. Are you ok?"

Jonathan smiled at him. "Yeah. Come here Jonathan."

He sat down near Joyce and she put an arm around him. They stayed there silently looking at Will. He had an oxygen mask covering half his face. His skin had returned to the same sickly green shade of months ago and there were bandages on his chest, covering his new scar. *Scars I tried so hard to shield him from, thought Jonathan Fate has a weird way of catching up to you. I guess we're cursed. He'll look like me.* Jonathan smiled at the thought. He didn't really find it funny but he preferred to laugh than to cry. Jonathan found it was easier for him to keep it together and he wondered if it had anything to do with talking to Nancy. *Talking?* He laughed at himself. *More like a full-fledged crying session.* Whatever it was, he couldn't deny that it had helped.

Jonathan yawned and suddenly realized that his mom was asleep, leaning against him. *What is it with people falling asleep on me? I guess I make a good pillow.* He sat there for a bit before carefully extricating himself and walked up to Will. He was afraid of touching him and causing any further damage. Will looked so damn fragile. Jonathan

reached out and felt his forehead. He was surprised to find that Will was hot, clammy almost; he'd been expecting him to be cold.

*I gotta get out of here. The longer I look at him, the more likely I am to lose it.* Jonathan slipped out of the room, made his way out of the hospital, and wandered aimlessly around the neighborhood.

---

Dr. Bradley found Joyce asleep and gently shook her awake.

"Hey Joyce," They were on first-name terms at this point. "We need to talk." She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Go ahead."

Bradley took a deep breath. "Ok, X-rays show that uh, there's some damage to Will's lungs. We don't know if that happened during surgery or if the growth is to blame. We're going to have to fix that. It'll be awhile before we can operate on him again. So for now, he's stuck on the ventilator."

"Is he going to be ok? What does this mean? Will he live?" Joyce was on the verge of tears.

"We don't know for sure yet. We have to see how he looks when he wakes up; we have to run some more tests. But my gut feeling is that we dodged a bullet. This was similar to an embolism. It could have killed him if there was no one in that room. The team did a good job. He'll probably always have some breathing problems, akin to asthma, but I think that's a small price to pay for his life." Dr. Bradley wiped the sweat from his brow. He'd been up for twenty-eight hours straight, and participated in a high risk surgery. He was drained.

Joyce burst into tears. She'd held back throughout the night and the surgery, but now the relief was too great. "Th...thank you. Thank you for...for saving my son."

Dr. Bradley hugged her. He knew it was unprofessional but it was impossible not to be moved by this band of family and friends. "We are going to do everything we possibly can for him, ok? We'll take

care of him. I'm ordering daily X-rays of his entire body so that we don't get caught off guard again. This thing, whatever it is, is damn tricky."

Joyce nodded and took a few deep breaths. "I don't know how I can ever thank you..."

"You don't have to. Just keep Will's spirit up. We need him to make it through this."

---

Joyce walked into the waiting room and everyone crowded around her. "He'll be ok." She said, keeping it short. Everybody started talking at once. Karen hugged Joyce. Nancy didn't know how, but she ended up hugging a baffled Hopper. The boys roared and did some kind of victory dance. And Holly started singing 'happy birthday' for some reason.

After they had all calmed down, Joyce became aware that Jonathan was not in the room. Just as she came to this realization, he walked in. Joyce walked over to him and hugged him tight.

"He's ok. He'll be ok." She whispered into his shoulder.

She held on to him for a long time and cried. Jonathan patted her back a little awkwardly; he wasn't used to hugging his mom in front of so many people.

They all wanted to see Will but there was a problem; he was very susceptible to infection after his surgery. The boys however, sat down stubbornly and proclaimed that they would not leave the hospital without seeing him.

"He's not even conscious, guys." Jonathan told them.

"So what, he could probably hear us or something." Dustin said. "Like subconsciously."

"Do you have any idea what you're talking about?" Lucas asked him. They were back at it, which was a good sign. The situation had been so serious that they hadn't argued all night.

Just then, Joyce walked back into the room. "Ok, good news, you can come see him for a bit, but no touching."

They leaped up and raced after Joyce. Hopper, Nancy, Jonathan, and Karen, holding Holly, followed. The group arrived at Will's room and Mike opened the door cautiously. They tramped in and spread out around Will's bed. It was quiet as they each thought about how close they'd come to losing him. Then the chatter started.

"What's that in his mouth?"

"What happened to his chest?"

"I just want to give him a hug."

"He can't breathe on his own yet?"

"His skin looks a little like Darth Vader's." That was Dustin, charming as always. Nancy kicked him.

Ten minutes passed when Karen looked at her watch. "Ok, guys. We need to go. Come on."

She said goodbye to Joyce and walked out, followed by Dustin, Lucas and Holly.

Jonathan noticed Mike lingering around Will's bed. He saw a tear slip down his cheek and he saw him touch Will's hand lightly. Jonathan walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. He'll make it. We're gonna get him out of here."

Mike looked up at him and nodded his head vigorously. "I know." He said, wiping his eye. "I just...I always wonder how bad it hurts him... He looks so bad."

"Yeah, he does. But he's alive."

Karen popped her head back into the room. "Come on guys, we need

to go."

Mike headed out and Nancy, giving Jonathan a look, followed. Jonathan went after her, despite misgivings, and found her hanging back as the others had already turned the corner.

She took his hand and just looked at him. Jonathan looked back into her bright blue eyes and felt the now familiar butterflies return to his chest. They didn't say anything. They didn't need to. Nancy leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Then she pulled away and turned to leave. Their hands remained clasped until the last moment. Neither of them ever wanted to let go.

## 14. Chapter 14

Will woke up in a dark room. His chest was on fire, his head hurt, his whole body ached, and he couldn't breathe. Will tried to cry out but found that he couldn't. He looked around and took stock of the situation. He had an oxygen mask on, there was a new machine in the room, and he could feel something stuck down his throat.

"Mom!" he screamed. But no sound came out. He tried again but still nothing. He began to panic. *Am I back in the Upside Down? It's all dark and I can't talk. Maybe this is a nightmare.* He tried calling his mom and Jonathan but couldn't, he tried to sit up but he was too weak, he even tried to pull the mask off his face. Frustrated and frightened, he began to cry. *What happened to me? We just finished the birthday party. Where is everyone?*

Joyce found him like this, fifteen minutes later. She turned on the light in the room and rushed over to him. "You're ok, Will. I'm here. You'll be ok, baby." She soothed. Will calmed down but was still terrified. *Why can't I talk?* He tried mouthing at his mom. She didn't understand what he was saying but saw his lips moving.

"You're on a ventilator, honey. There's a tube down your throat so you can't talk for now. Don't worry, though. You'll get it out in no time."

Will tried to talk again and failed. His lip quivered as he tried to stop himself from crying but the frustration was too much. Joyce held him as he cried silently, tears streaming down his face. She helped him sit up and got him a pen and paper.

"Here baby, you can write whatever you want to say."

Will took the paper and immediately started writing. **What happened to me?**

"You scared us, Will. We were all in your room after the party and you started shaking and coughing, like a seizure. It turns out the monster had spread to your lungs. They had to do a surgery to remove it. If we hadn't been in the room at the time..." Joyce

shuddered.

**Is that why my chest hurts?**

"Yeah honey. They cut it wide open. You're gonna have a pretty nasty scar."

Will started to relax. It was a lot easier now that he knew what was going on. The panic had gone, although he still felt pretty bad. **Is this gonna keep me in the hospital a lot longer?**

"We don't really know right now. Probably a little longer."

Just then, Jonathan walked in. When he saw that Will was up, he hurried over. Will threw his thin arms around him and Jonathan hugged him back. It was good to feel Will, to see him breathing and moving again. "Oh God, Will, You scared us! I thought we'd lost you"

Will smiled at him. He was glad to be alive, but more than that, he was happy for his mom and brother. Throughout his time in the hospital, Will had often thought about what would happen to them if he died.

They told him all about the night before, how everyone had stayed over. Will was overcome by emotion. He knew that they cared about him, that they were real friends, but it choked him up to hear how concerned they were. He started writing again. **I never thanked you for the party. It was amazing!**

"Oh, that was Jonathan. I had nothing to do with it!" Joyce laughed.

"No, it wasn't just me. Mike, Dustin and Lucas helped. And Nancy." Jonathan blushed when he said her name and Will took notice. Will smirked. **Are you in love with Nancy?**

"Hey!" Jonathan said indignantly. Will was writing furiously. **I saw you sitting together at the party and just now you blushed when you mentioned her.**

"Yeah, well... Patty kissed you yesterday in front of everyone." Jonathan countered. It occurred to him how weird it was that his thirteen year old brother had kissed a girl before he did.

Now it was Will's turn to blush. They burst out laughing at each other's embarrassment.

Joyce looked on. *How did I not notice Jonathan and Nancy?* She thought to herself. *I've been too busy. I'm always too busy. I'm going to pay more attention to them after this is all over.* Joyce was happy for Jonathan; she knew he'd never really had any friends, let alone a girlfriend. She just hoped that he didn't get hurt in the end; he'd been through enough in his life. *We all have.*

---

Mike sat on his bed, depressed. School was starting tomorrow and he was dreading it. He couldn't really explain it, but he just wanted to be with Will at the hospital. Life was tedious. He couldn't really stand to go to school and have Troy and James bullying him. To hear all the 'look at the freak' comments. To sit through classes. Everything seemed so trivial.

Mike thought about last night at the hospital. He thought about the whole summer, hanging out with Will, and Lucas, and Dustin, and Nancy and Jonathan. It was strange, but he'd felt happy that way. He thought about playing games with the kids at the hospital. He thought about the birthday party the day before, and how awesome he'd felt seeing everyone laughing and smiling. He didn't want to go back to normal. He felt like he belonged to something now. He didn't want to give that up.

Karen came in with some fresh laundry.

"What's wrong, Mike?"

Mike shrugged, he didn't know how to explain it.

"Are you worried about school?"

Mike shook his head. Karen put the clothes away and sat down near Mike. She was tired of not knowing what her kids were dealing with. "Come on Mike, what's up?"

"I can't really explain it."



"Try."

"It's like, being at the hospital all summer with everyone, I don't know...I felt good. We were a team. I was happy being around everyone there. They...we all have...like we all understand each other and we all went through the same stuff together. And now, we're gonna break apart, sort of. We're all gonna go to school and get all busy and not have any time to hang out anymore. I'll have to go to school and deal with all the idiots there. I don't know. Like I wish it could be just us. I don't know...it doesn't really make sense."

"Yes it does." Karen said looking at him. "I understand the way you feel. You feel like that dynamic from the summer will end, but I don't think it will. We just need to make sure we stick together. We'll do things together, we'll hang out. We'll have fun. There are more important things in life than school. Things like friends and family. I first realized that this summer myself, you know. Like it's not the end of the world if you guys go to sleep at three a.m. We need to take a break sometimes and just enjoy each other. Have fun, laugh, play some games, without worrying about work, and tests and life."

Mike looked at his mom, surprised. His mom was the one who would ground him for not showing up to dinner. She was the one who forced him to go to sleep at ten o'clock. Who didn't allow him to eat junk food. Who made him make his bed every morning and clean his room every week. She was the one who wouldn't stop nagging him about schoolwork and tests.

"You've changed Mom."

"I think we all have. And for the better." Mike felt the dread lifting a bit and he smiled.

---

Jonathan walked into school. It was the first day of his senior year. He wanted to skip school completely and just get a GED, but Joyce insisted that he go. So here he was. School was absolutely miserable for Jonathan and always had been. He'd always been an outcast. The last time he could remember having a friend in school was in first

grade. Some girl named Monica who had moved away in the summer of '73. He often wondered if his life would've been different if she'd stayed.

Academically, too, school was torturous. Jonathan was just plain bored. Everything was too easy. He would spend maybe ten minutes on homework every night. A little more if a report was due, writing wasn't his forte. He learned to occupy his time with other things, like movies and books and music and Will and his mom.

But it wasn't until seventh grade when things become unbearable at school. That was the year his parents divorced and, being the small town that it was, the entire Hawkins middle school knew all about it. That's when he went from 'the loner' to 'the creepy psycho'. Life at home became a whole lot better but life at school became a living hell. Jonathan played hooky all the time and hung out at the lake behind their house instead. Joyce never knew much about it, she was trying to piece her life together after Lonnie. He kept his grades up and put on a smile. Around that time is when he got serious about photography. He saved up, bought himself a camera, and started taking pictures at the river and in the forest. Occasionally Jonathan would take Will along and that became their refuge from everything and everyone.

They'd spent hundreds of hours at that lake together. Jonathan smiled thinking about it. He wanted to go out there again; he hadn't been for nearly a year.

"Jonathan!"

Jonathan was shaken out of his reverie. *What now?* He thought. Ninety nine percent of the time, people calling his name in school meant something unpleasant was about to happen. *It can't be Tommy or Steve, they're not here anymore.* He'd gotten into some trouble after knocking Tommy out. The superintendent had gotten involved and it had been extremely unpleasant. He turned around and saw Nancy walking up to him.

"Oh, hi." Jonathan said awkwardly. They'd hung out all summer but somehow, in school, they became uncomfortable together.

"So how's Will?" Nancy asked. "We all want to come see him."

"Not so good, actually. He can't talk so he's pretty frustrated. I'll ask the doctors about when everyone can come over."

Nancy nodded and just stood there looking at him. Jonathan felt himself growing hot. *What does she want? What is she waiting for?*

"Umm...is there anything else?"

"Yeah," Nancy burst out. "We need to talk. Like after school sometime."

Jonathan became nervous. "Uh, ok. Like today?"

"Whenever you want."

---

She came over that afternoon. The house was eerily quiet and she found Jonathan out back with the dog.

"Hi."

He jumped up and smiled when he saw it was her.

"Oh, hi! You scared me." He pointed at the dog. "This guy is so lonely. He's Will's but they won't let him in at the hospital. He hasn't seen Will in eight months. I try to play with him a little every day, take him out." It was so much easier to talk to her here, out in the open.

Nancy smiled. "Wanna take him for a walk now?"

"Yeah," Jonathan said putting a leash around the dog. He wiped the dirt from his pants. "Let's go."

They strolled through the forest, chatting easily and Jonathan found himself leading Nancy to the river. They sat down there and just watched the water in comfortable silence. The minutes ticked by and still they sat there, relaxed in each other's company.

"Jonathan?" Nancy finally asked. Her voice was serious and Jonathan turned to her.

"Can I ask you something?" she continued. Jonathan nodded.

"Why do you keep trying to distance yourself from me?" She said, gazing at him. Jonathan looked away from her penetrating stare. *How did she know? Have I been so obvious?*

"Yeah, I've noticed, how could I not?" Nancy said. "Every time I even brush against you, you shudder or freeze. It's like you're...you're scared of something but I have no idea what. Is it because you don't want to be with me?" Jonathan shook his head furiously, still not looking at her.

"Then what is it?" Jonathan still didn't move, he didn't think he could get the words out.

"Jonathan, look at me." He did and she saw the tortured expression on his face. "I think I deserve an explanation."

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah. You do. I just don't know if I can give you a good one. I've been meaning to talk to you for months now but I just..." He sighed. "Ok, here goes. Uh, you said I look scared and you're right. I am scared. Terrified actually. I'm scared of hurting you."

Nancy looked at him incredulously. "What?! You're the last person in the world who would hurt me."

Jonathan shook his head. "No I'm not. I...I grew up in a messed up situation. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what's ok and what's not. And I know that I have the potential to...I don't want to hurt you. People who hang around me usually end up getting hurt and I don't want you to have to deal with that." His tone was bitter and his voice hoarse. "I'm scared of what I'll do to you. I don't trust myself to be in a relationship." There, he'd said it.

"That's bullshit, Jonathan." Nancy said angrily. "There's nothing wrong with you! You have to stop beating yourself up!" She was yelling now. "You're nothing like your dad, if that's what you're

getting at. And you say that because you grew up the way you did, you can't be in a relationship? Well, guess what? That makes two of us! Ok? My parents aren't exactly models of a good relationship! Sure, we live in a nice house and put up a good front, but that's just a facade. You need to start trusting yourself. You're a damn good guy!" Jonathan found that he was holding back tears. He wasn't used to hearing positive things about himself and hearing Nancy talking like this choked him up.

She continued. "And you say that you don't want to hurt me? Well guess what? You're hurting me right now, the way you're pushing me away." She was crying now. "I need you, Jonathan. You act like you're damaged goods, like you're broken. *I'm* broken, Jonathan. We all are. And I need you to make me whole. I want you! I want you so bad. that it hurts every time you look away from me, or you clam up when I touch you."

Something broke inside of Jonathan. He'd been beaten, harassed, bullied, threatened and mocked his whole life. He'd never been wanted before. Hearing the girl he loved, and had been through hell with, say 'I want you', changed everything. It was like a dam had burst and Jonathan began to understand.

He reached out and lifted her chin up. Their eyes met. "I...I know and I'm sorry. I...I'm gonna be here for you Nancy. I need you just as much as you need me. Probably a whole lot more."

Nancy eyes seemed to brighten. She smiled and then flung her arms around him and cried as he held her tightly. The two of them sat there for hours, talking, laughing and crying. In a world where death and sickness was ever-present, and happiness was hard to come by, they had each other at least.

---

Will had his tube removed a week later. After the doctor had left, it was just Joyce and him in the room. Will couldn't stop coughing. It was hard to breathe, his throat was all scratchy. The painkillers he was on made him very tired and irritable. Joyce sat on the bed and held him. Will buried his face in her shoulder.

"I love you, Mom." He said, his voice muffled.

"I love you too, baby." Joyce patted his back. He was desperately thin, and was getting more depressed by the day. Will was recovering from a second surgery on his lungs aimed at repairing his windpipe. He was fatigued. He'd been in the hospital for eight months and he was cracking. His mood had plummeted from the high of the summer, and now he wondered if he'd ever make it out of the hospital, despite the fact that he was doing a lot better.

"You're getting better, Will. You're gonna get out of here soon."

"No I'm not. I'm never gonna get out of here." Joyce sighed. She hadn't realized how lucky they were that Will had been in good spirits for the last few months. He'd been the one reassuring them. Now that he was so broken, the days became much longer.

Mike, Dustin and Lucas couldn't visit as much anymore, as they were in school. They just came out on weekends. Jonathan was there all the time and tried his best to improve Will's morale but was largely unsuccessful.

"You will, baby. We'll get you out of here. I've got a meeting with Dr. Bradley tomorrow, and he hinted that there's good news. Don't give up now, Will."

Will just buried his head deeper in his mom's shoulder.

## 15. Chapter 15

October came and with it came good news. Will was improving rapidly. It was stunning really. He was now able to eat normal food, his breathing was much better, and the X-rays showed that the Monster was almost gone. They were able to continue the radiation that had been halted for a month. He began doing physical therapy to strengthen his muscles which hadn't been used in ages. They all became optimistic again and Will's dark moods passed. He was once again the cheerful kid of old.

Jonathan and Joyce became hopeful that Will would soon be back home and they began to prepare for his release. He would be very weak and would have to be driven everywhere he went. He wouldn't be able to start school right away either, and when he did he would have to take it slowly. He would also still be on various medications that would make him drowsy. They didn't really care though, they just wanted him back.

---

It was on a Sunday in late October when Dr. Bradley summoned them to his office.

"Ok, folks. I have something here that I need to show you." He produced a large stack of X-rays and spread them out on the table. "Have a look." He said with a mischievous expression on his face.

They looked at the photos, not sure what they were supposed to be seeing. The X-rays were all of Will's organs and they were dated. They looked up at Dr. Bradley. He leaned forward and rearranged the pictures. "These are from eight months ago," he said pointing to one stack. "And these are from today," he said pointing to another stack.

They tried again but still couldn't make anything out; medical imaging was usually reserved for those who knew what they were doing. When they looked up, Dr. Bradley was grinning from ear to ear.

"It's gone guys, he's clear!"

"What?!" they shouted together.

"It's gone. Will is clean." Dr. Bradley said.

They looked at each other, realization dawning on them that their ten month nightmare was finally ending. That Will was okay. That they no longer needed to fear losing a loved one. Joyce burst into tears and hugged Jonathan. Her boy was okay. Jonathan patted her back. "He's ok, Mom. It's over."

Joyce turned to Dr. Bradley "I don't know how to thank you. I..."

Bradley shook his head. "No, need. It's my job." He said a bit awkwardly. But Joyce was having none of it. She got up, walked around the table and hugged the doctor.

"So...um, yeah." Dr. Bradley continued, rubbing his brow, when she had let go. "So we're going to keep him in the hospital for another week or two, just to make sure this thing is really gone. And he's going to have to come in every month for the next year or so. He's also still very weak and we need to discuss his breathing. He'll need to carry an inhaler wherever he goes. Preferably, he shouldn't be left alone for long. We're going to give you some training on how to deal with an asthma-like attack, and I think his friends should also be here for that."

They nodded their understanding.

"Well, why don't you go tell Will the good news?" Bradley asked them. They thanked him again and then headed to Will's room.

When Will got the news he also burst into tears but he was smiling.

---

Jonathan came home that night and suddenly realized what an awful mess the house was. *Gonna have to clean this up before Will gets home*, he thought. The prospect was daunting though, so he decided to call in some backup.



The next day Nancy and the boys arrived after school. Nancy stopped dead as she stepped over the threshold. "Whoa! This looks like a real bachelor pad."

"Well, that's what it's been." Jonathan said smirking.

Music blasting, they got to work. They had a lot of fun in Will's room. Jonathan couldn't bring himself to clean the room until now in case Will never came home so the slime was still there from months ago. They flung it around at each other before dumping it all into a bucket.

"Hey, guys. I think we should burn this shit, it can probably, like, grow or something." Dustin announced. They agreed and headed outside where they built a small bonfire and threw all the monster sludge in.

"Imagine if people see us now, what the hell would they think?" Lucas laughed.

"Yeah, standing around a bonfire in October, tossing this shit in it. It'll look like some freaky ritual" Dustin said. They all burst out laughing and couldn't stop.

"Guys, it's a real shame that we don't roast some hot dogs now." Dustin said. They looked at him. "What? I'm hungry."

"Ok, let's go get some food." Nancy said. She, Dustin and Lucas got into the car and headed off, leaving Mike and Jonathan to watch the fire. They sat together in comfortable silence before Mike spoke.

"I'm worried about Will." He said suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Jonathan asked.

"When he gets back to school, they're gonna give him a hard time." Mike answered. "You know, with his hair and everything. And he really hates it. Like more than any of us."

"Oh, yeah. They give him a hard time anyway, don't they?"

"Yeah, they do. They call him queer and things like that. I'm worried

about how he'll handle it now." Mike said.

"He has you guys." Jonathan said looking at Mike. "He'll be ok. And if he's not, then I'll go and beat up a couple of them. He shouldn't have to deal with that on top of everything."

Mike smiled at him and nodded. "Yeah, that would be cool. Eleven broke Troy's hand and made him pee himself." Mike's smile faded as he thought of Eleven. Jonathan didn't miss it.

"Hey, I'm sorry about Eleven." he said to Mike. "I know we owe Will's life to her."

Mike nodded, staring into the fire. Just then Nancy drove up and got out of the car with Lucas and Dustin. They laid out a stash of hot dogs, marshmallows and some coke. Mike's mood immediately lightened and he and Dustin started roasting some food. They all gorged until they couldn't eat another bite before they put out the fire and headed back inside to continue cleaning. The boys headed to the kitchen to wash up and Jonathan and Nancy went into the living room to put things in order there.

They worked in silence for a bit, with some music playing in the background. After ten minutes, *Paranoid* started playing and Nancy suddenly raised the volume. She took Jonathan's hand and before he knew it, they were dancing. Jonathan didn't really know what he was doing; he wasn't much of a dancer, so Nancy took control. They were just getting into it, when Dustin walked in.

"GUYS!" he bellowed. "YOU GOTTA COME SEE THIS!" Mike and Lucas ran in from the kitchen and stared, their mouths hanging open.

"You are freakin' kidding me!" Lucas said finally.

"Whoa!" Mike added.

They stood there, shocked for a minute, before the antics started. They whooped, hollered, wolf-whistled and made kissy faces but Nancy and Jonathan didn't care, they were having too much fun. The boys watched, keeping up a running commentary, as they danced their way through *Paranoid*, *Superstition*, *Hound Dog*, and finally, *My*

*Sharona*, before collapsing on the couch.

"That was fun!" Nancy said breathlessly. Jonathan just smiled, blushing. They went to the kitchen to get some water, passing the boys who were now calling for a kiss. Ignoring them, they got drinks before heading back into the living room.

"Guys, Halloween is a week away and we have no idea what we're doing." Dustin called out suddenly.

"Yeah, because we were all busy with Will. Who even cares about Halloween anymore?" Lucas said.

"Uh, I do. It's the best time of the year to get a stash of candy." Dustin countered.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "You always have a stash of candy."

"I think we should do it in the hospital, like we did Will's birthday. It'll be fun. We can do a movie or something like that." Mike said. They all liked the idea and started throwing around options. Star Wars was the obvious choice, but they battled it out with Jaws, Indiana Jones and Ghostbusters, as well as ET.

"How do you even do ET?" Lucas asked. "Besides, I think it's a little too close to home. I mean think of it! Like that pretty much happened to us."

"Oh man! I just wish they make a Lord of the Rings movie already. I can't believe they haven't!" Dustin moaned. They went around and around but always ended up at Star Wars, so Star Wars it was. Then they fought it out, as to who gets to be which character. Nancy even agreed to do Princess Leia. They hung around a little longer until nine o'clock rolled around.

"Ok, guys, we gotta go. I told Mom we'll be home by nine-ish." Nancy said. Jonathan thanked them all for coming and they said their goodbyes and left.

---

Halloween came, and that night, they all stormed into Will's room. There was a Darth Vader, a Luke, a Yoda, and a Princess Leia. Will was happy for their company, he'd been pretty gloomy all day at the prospect of spending Halloween stuck in the hospital. The troupe went around to a bunch of rooms, performing some goofy scenes they'd practiced. They had a lot of fun and it felt good to make the kids laugh.

A week later, the big day arrived. Will was being released from the hospital after nine months. The staff held a little goodbye party and everyone was crying. They'd really grown attached to Will and were both happy and sad to see him go.

"I'll come visit guys, I promise." Will told the nurses. He gave them each a hug and a card he made, thanking them for looking after him. Then he made his way around the ward, going into every room. He'd befriended most of the kids in the ward and loved them all. Especially one. He went to Patty's room alone and kissed her. She cried about him leaving, he'd become her best friend and they'd spent hours talking together. She would also miss all of Will's friends coming over and brightening the mood.

"Don't worry Patty. I'll come visit." Will told her. "I promise, I won't forget about you."

Will changed into some normal clothes. They felt scratchy and stiff after the hospital gowns he'd been wearing. Finally they went to see Dr. Bradley. They were all a little overcome by emotion and spent half the meeting crying. Will hugged and thanked the doctor who'd helped him through his whole ordeal.

"Hey, just look after him ok? Remember what to do if he's having trouble breathing." Dr. Bradley said.

Finally they checked out of the hospital for good, with a load of medication, and instructions, and they got into the car. When they got home they really didn't know what to do, so they all sat down on the couch and watched movies together. Joyce leaned back and sighed. She was drained, mentally, physically and emotionally, and she had a boatload of debt to pay off now, but she had her boys with her and that's what mattered.

Joyce put an arm around each of her sons. "I love you guys," she said smiling at both of them. They smiled back at her, happy to be back together.

"I love you mom." Will said. Jonathan just put an arm around her and they sat that way until Will dozed off.

---

That night, they were all at the Wheelers', where Karen had insisted on throwing a party in honor of Will's homecoming. They talked, and ate, and laughed together, recounting stories and playing games. At one point, Joyce tried to give a little speech, thanking everyone for what they'd done, but she couldn't get the words out before tearing up. So they all just gave her a hand.

Hopper arrived a little late. He didn't intend to come at all but Joyce had done everything but drag him to the party. Will ran up to him, a little breathless.

"Thank you, Chief." He said, and he hugged Hopper around the waist. Hopper felt a lump in his throat. It had been a long time since he'd been hugged by a kid. He patted Will's bare head awkwardly. Hopper's mind flashed back to those long nights he'd spent at the hospital. Will would often wake up whimpering and he'd try to calm him down as best he could. Hopper didn't think Will remembered those episodes but apparently, he did.

"Yeah, just take care of yourself kid." He said gruffly, pulling away from Will. He sat down in a corner, waiting for an opportune time to sneak away.

Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will were sitting on the couch, planning a campaign for next week. They were soon joined by Mr. Clarke who was no D&D novice. He was still helping Will catch up in school, despite not being his teacher anymore.

Suddenly there was an uproar.

"Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God!" Dustin yelled. "Shit! Shit!

Shit!"

Karen looked over, disapprovingly. "Language, boys."

"Can you believe it?!" Lucas yelled.

"What are you guys on about?" Karen asked.

"Do you know what the date is?!" Mike yelled.

"Uh...yeah, today's the sixth."

"Exactly!" Dustin shouted. "It's exactly one year from when Will disappeared! If that doesn't freak you out then I don't know what will!"

Everyone in the room marveled over this a bit before resuming their activities. Dustin cautioned Joyce to watch Will carefully tonight in case 'some shitty inter-dimensional creature decides to snatch him again'.

Nancy and Jonathan sat together, her arm snaking around him. Jonathan looked around the room and felt his heart expand. He watched Will and the boys laughing, he watched his mom and Karen talking, he watched Holly sitting on a sleeping Ted's lap, he watched Hopper sneaking a smoke. Hopper caught his glance and raised an eyebrow at him and Nancy. Jonathan just looked down, smiling. It was amazing how much of that he was doing lately. He scanned the room again, taking everyone in. They weren't all just acquaintances anymore. They weren't even friends; they were family.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Well, there you have it! What did you think? I'll be posting the next part soon.